

## Into Shadows We Fall

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/766729) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/766729>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a> , <a href="#">Rape/Non-Con</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Rise of the Guardians (2012)</a> , <a href="#">Guardians of Childhood - William Joyce</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Jack Frost/Pitch Black</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Jack Frost</a> , <a href="#">Pitch Black</a> , <a href="#">Toothiana</a> , <a href="#">E. Aster Bunnymund</a> , <a href="#">General Kozmotis Pitchiner</a> , <a href="#">The Nightmare King</a> , <a href="#">Nicholas St. North</a> , <a href="#">Sanderson Mansnoozie</a> , <a href="#">Gwyn ap Nudd</a> , <a href="#">August Each Uisge</a> , <a href="#">Nain Rouge</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Whump</a> , <a href="#">Adventure</a> , <a href="#">Sexual Assault</a> , <a href="#">Nightmares</a> , <a href="#">Recovery</a> , <a href="#">Trauma</a> , <a href="#">PTSD</a> , <a href="#">Slow Burn</a> , <a href="#">Slow Build</a> , <a href="#">Healing</a> , <a href="#">Uneasy Allies</a> , <a href="#">Injury</a> , <a href="#">Depression</a> , <a href="#">Friendship</a> , <a href="#">Trust Issues</a> , <a href="#">Loss of Trust</a> , <a href="#">Possession</a> , <a href="#">Hopeful Ending</a> , <a href="#">Unseelie Court</a> , <a href="#">Seelie Court</a> , <a href="#">Rebuilding</a> , <a href="#">Mora</a> , <a href="#">Book Spoilers</a> , <a href="#">Book &amp; Movie Combination</a> , <a href="#">Dysfunctional Relationships</a> , <a href="#">Future Fic</a> , <a href="#">Dark</a> , <a href="#">touch starved</a> , <a href="#">AU</a> , <a href="#">Light BDSM</a>
Series:	Part 2 of <a href="#">Shadows and Light</a>
Stats:	Published: 2013-04-19 Completed: 2013-09-06 Chapters: 31/31 Words: 252914

## Into Shadows We Fall

by [not\\_poignant](#)

### Summary

Defeated by the Unseelie Court, Jack resolves to change his fate and undo the losses he's experienced, by taking back what's been taken from him. Dealing with diminished powers, loss and trauma, Jack will face new darknesses and deal with old shadows in order to search for moments of light and love. He will face the challenge of learning how to navigate a world not so black and white. (SEQUEL to *From the Darkness We Rise*.)

### Notes

Wow, so, let's get started shall we? :) \*rubs hands together in mostly terrified excitement\*

Also, [ghostglider](#) did [this most amazing poster](#) which fits the beginning of *Into Shadows We Fall* perfectly. I mean, it's really incredible.

# Pilgrimage

## Present day: The mountain

One foot in front of the other.

It was the most boring mantra he'd ever hung onto, but if he didn't, he was going to stumble and fall. Again. His legs didn't want to cooperate. Jack's whole world was reduced to the narrow path he navigated, the heavy weight on his back, snow that whipped around him.

It wasn't even snow he had any hand in making. It wasn't *his* snow. He wasn't allowed to use his powers on this mountain. Wasn't allowed to float or fly. Wasn't allowed to make snow or frost.

He looked mutinously at Gwyn. He could only just make out the shape of him, made hard to see by the snow that was dumped enthusiastically by the blizzard. The snowstorm had dogged them for almost twenty four hours. Strapped to Gwyn's back, Jack could see the shape of his own staff. Jack felt naked without it. He was used to holding it in one of his hands, and now his palms were bare. Even when he'd been human, he'd had the staff. He hadn't expected to miss it so much, and it wasn't even gone. Just bobbing up and down in time with the slow and steady steps of Gwyn up ahead.

He'd hated the treacherous mountain with a vengeance after the first six hours of walking on it. Gwyn, however, took climbing it in his stride. Literally. At one point he'd even mentioned feeling fortunate that he couldn't fly like Jack could. He'd wisely kept his mouth shut when he saw Jack's glare of response.

The broad leather strap that slung around one shoulder and tucked in across his ribs bruised him heavily. It chafed, cut into his skin. The sweatshirt he wore was the only thing that stopped his skin from breaking. The strap wasn't designed for his slight build. It was designed for a taller, more muscular warrior. The sword's weight against his back was never comfortable. No matter how often he adjusted the shoulder strap, no matter how often he shrugged his shoulders to shift it, he knew it wasn't his.

But he was doing this so that he could maybe give something back to the person the sword belonged to. Jack hung onto that thought fiercely as he plodded, step by step.

One foot in front of the other.

He didn't look down to his left. The sheer cliff dropped away from him. It was intimidating without his staff, with a sword unbalancing him. He would drop like a stone. Climbing the mountain had taxed him to the point where he wasn't even sure if he could muster enough energy to get the wind to break his fall.

The day before, he'd wearily closed his eyes while walking, trusting his feet to find the path. But without his staff, with the sword on his back, he'd listed sideways and would have tilted all the way off the mountain if Gwyn hadn't pulled him back and yelled at him to keep his eyes open. Even if he'd had his staff, and was allowed to make snow and ice and frost, he wouldn't have been able to make much. He was so drained, putting so much effort into the path in front of him, into climbing and forcing a body ill-used to so much walking into days of it.

Sleep was a more constant companion than anyone else except Gwyn.

His life was strange now.

The blizzard was heavy, he could barely see six feet in front of him. Snow didn't normally bother him, but that was when he could instinctively keep it away with wind. Now he was aware of how annoying it could be. At least it didn't melt down his clothing, like it did with Gwyn. At least he didn't need a fire at the end of the day, like Gwyn did when they made camp.

He fell heavily to one leg, flailing out with one hand and grabbing at a sharp, wet rock. He *couldn't* fall down the side. He refused to look down. He had never been scared of heights before in his life, but this mountain was cruel. That was the point, Gwyn had told him. The wights they were going to visit didn't like visitors. Getting to the summit was a quest in and of itself.

Jack hissed in pain when he felt two hands clutch tightly at his shoulders, pressing into bruises. Gwyn let go immediately. Jack was too tired to look up, too tired to do anything except make sure that he wouldn't fall. He realised, belatedly, that he was still firmly centred on the path – such as it was – and removed his hand from the stone awkwardly. It felt like the sword was a boot on his back, pushing him down towards the ground.

'You're tired,' Gwyn said, disapproving.

'No, I'm good,' Jack said, using the rising mountain face on his right to pull himself up. He fought back against the weight of the sword, the heaviness in his legs.

'You have to tell me when you're tired,' Gwyn said, and Jack scowled at the narrow pathway as he heard anger creep into his voice. For all that the Seelie King went on about fitness, the mountain was wearing him down too. *Or maybe it's just babysitting the frost spirit that's getting to him.* 'We could have made camp three hours ago. Now you're going to have to wait. There's nowhere to camp here. We have to keep moving.'

Jack bit his tongue. There was no use pointing out that Jack could technically camp anywhere, because the cold didn't bother *him*. He'd pointed that out on the first day, and Gwyn had stared at him as though Jack had said something incredibly rude. After that, Jack let Gwyn choose the camp sites, let him build the fires, let him pick the places they would rest. At first he was grateful that Gwyn was leading him, showing him the way. But by the end of the first day he had to remind himself to be grateful.

Gwyn looked at him searchingly. Jack could almost hear all the stupid things Gwyn had told him in the days before they'd reached the mountain: *You realise that you're weak. We can't use our powers on this mountain. We have to reach the summit in three days, or they won't see us. They still may not work with you, even if we get there. There are other ways, and we will find them. You don't even know if this will be effective. I am not sure if this will work. I have responsibilities to the Seelie Court, I hope you realise what you're asking of me.*

Jack walked again, stubbornly, gritting his teeth against the hardness in his heart, the retorts that waited in the base of his throat, the pain in his legs and shoulders. Gwyn nodded and turned around, and they both started plodding back up the mountain again.

Jack's mental reply to so much of Gwyn's early dissent was the same one he told himself.

*No one else is gonna do it, so I'm going to. If you think you can talk me out of saving him, you've got another thing coming.*

\*

## 25 Days Earlier:

Static. A buzz of white noise. Ringing in his ears.

A giant hand stroked his shaking fingers with surprising tenderness. But why? Jack stared numbly at his fisted hand. It hurt. His leg was bleeding. His foot was bleeding. If he looked up, he'd see the Nain Rouge nearby, slumped on the ground. If he looked up, he'd see the exit the Nightmare King had left through. If he looked up...

He didn't look up.

The giant hand was so tender though, so gentle. It stroked at his fingers over and over again, like soothing a horse, *or a reindeer*. Suddenly he knew who it was. He didn't know when North had entered. He didn't want North. He thought if he looked at North, he might start to cry.

He couldn't cry. If he started, he'd never stop. If he started, he'd forget what he'd resolved to do. He'd let himself be coddled and looked after and all the things he'd always wanted and never knew how much he needed until only recently and now he couldn't, no, because he'd forget. He'd let despair in. There was so much of it. Resolve was a spider's thread inside of him, despair was a maelstrom. He had to keep them separate.

The stroking didn't stop, and Jack responded to it by opening his fingers. Pain made his knuckles feel crunchy. He looked down at the locket, at Seraphina's face. The metallic, charred edges of the locket had cut into his palm.

The stroking on his hands stopped, and then he felt those giant hands wrap around his torso to pull him upright. Jack's spare hand moved out automatically to his staff, but it wasn't there. A giant hand placed it carefully into his palm. He sighed. That was familiar. The staff was familiar.

He stood up, looked down at the foot that was injured. Why was it injured? Where had all the lacerations come from? And then horror. He'd injured himself, he'd injured himself when the shadow had tried to-

*No. Stop it. Not now.*

Jack looked up slowly, carefully avoiding North's gaze. The gymnasium was somehow – miraculously – still whole. He felt that after the events that had just occurred, the school shouldn't be left standing. He wanted his environment to reflect what had been razed inside. And then he dismissed that. Dismissed it, because that kind of thinking would connect him to the pain inside his heart, and he couldn't afford to feel it.

'He saved me,' Jack whispered.

North said nothing. Jack's eyes sought out Gwyn's, who nodded at him seriously. Gwyn knew. Gwyn still looked shaken – paler than his usual paleness. Jack blinked as he remembered Gwyn being forced to his knees, forced to drop his sword; all thanks to the Nightmare King's ability to evoke terror. At some point Gwyn had stood up, he'd picked up his sword. He looked in control. It must have happened while Jack had knelt on the floor, losing all sense of time.

He couldn't bring himself to call the Nightmare King by any other name, anymore. He couldn't. They were different. That hadn't been Pitch.

Bunnymund cleared his throat.

'I can't believe you ever trusted him.'

Jack's focus sharpened, narrowed. He stepped forwards and his whole leg throbbed pain at him and he didn't care. He pushed it somewhere inside of him. He could deal with it later. Or not at all. The pain didn't matter.

'*What* did you say?' he said. His voice lower, made dark by a lurking anger inside of him.

Bunnymund glared, and Jack was surprised at how quickly the responding rage inside of him grew. One moment he was made of numbness and the next...

'He *saved* me,' Jack said, louder.

'Is that what you call it?' Bunnymund said, voice hard. 'Is that what that looked like to you? You're bloody delusional. Because I just saw someone who had been biding his time until he could *use* us to get the shadows back.'

'What is *wrong* with you?!' Jack shouted in disbelief. 'He just saved my life. He *healed* you! He didn't have to do that! Seriously, are you *trying* to mess with me?'

'You've been brainwashed,' Bunnymund said, and Jack scoffed, anger swirling through him, cold as ice. Unlike the pain and the despair, he didn't mind the anger. Anger was galvanising. It fortified him. It allowed him to focus. And if he focused on the anger, he didn't have to think about the Nightmare King or how the shadows had felt *inside* of him or the fact that he couldn't just ask Pitch to heal the wounds on his leg because Pitch wasn't-

Jack growled and stepped forwards, crouching and readying his staff. Bunnymund withdrew his boomerang. That was when everyone else seemed to realise that it wasn't the time or place.

'We *must* leave,' Gwyn said. 'Augus' dome is down, and humans will be coming.' He started to sheathe his sword and then thought the better of it. The blade was still covered in blood. He stepped towards North and Jack instead, resolute.

'We'll meet at the Workshop?' North suggested, and Gwyn nodded.

'What if you're wrong?' Bunnymund rasped. 'What if Jack *has* been brainwashed? What then? You think he should be back in that Workshop? How do we know he hasn't been possessed by the shadows too?'

North made a sound of disbelief. Jack wanted to make the same noise, but tiredness was starting to creep over him. He'd made all those snowstorms, all the snowballs, distressed children had been crying; it had stripped him down, left him weary. More than that, though, his body told him that if he slept, he wouldn't have to think anymore. He could disappear. Jack wanted that.

'Aster,' Gwyn said, 'Jack isn't possessed by shadows. And I, too, believe that Pitch saved Jack from possession. Are you doubting *me*?'

Bunnymund said nothing, but it was clear from his narrowed eyes and his aggressively pointed ears that he did.

'Perhaps you had best come back with me,' Gwyn said, turning back to Jack. 'Augus Each Uisge has set his sights on you. Come back to the Seelie Court, where we can better protect you.'

'Jack comes back with me,' North said, fiercely, and Gwyn disagreed. Tense words floated over Jack's head like tiny fluffy pieces of cumulus. He became aware of a tense jaw, of teeth wanting to chatter together, and he bit down on them until the tension resolved into a sharp ache. He pushed that down too. He focused only on the resolve inside him.

'I'll go with Gwyn,' he said, finally making eye contact with North.

He looked away immediately. He was right. Looking at North made him want to cry. He couldn't tolerate the heavy weight in his eyes, the sadness changing the wrinkles on his face. North looked at Jack as though he understood, as though he could see right past his resolve to the well of pain inside of him.

Jack thought he'd have more time to pull himself together. He thought that he'd get a chance to tell North that it would be okay. To ask North to make sure Sandy and Toothiana and Mora were okay. But Gwyn placed a hand on his shoulder and they dissolved into light.

Teleporting with Gwyn was nothing like teleporting with Pitch. It was easier. One second they were in the gymnasium and the next, they shimmered into existence in the middle of a forest cathedral. Giant trees grew up to the sky and wove their canopy so that only tiny shafts of light entered. The teleporting didn't hurt; it felt warm.

There were hardly any fae around, and Jack was beyond noticing anything else as Gwyn led him over to a wooden chair by a wooden table.

There was an annoying, constant noise in his ears. He looked down at his fisted hand that protected the locket. His whole mouth hurt. His teeth were chattering. That was the noise. But Jack couldn't stop now that he'd noticed. A moment later he started trembling violently.

It felt wrong to hold the locket.

*What just happened?*

It felt wrong to be anywhere without Pitch, without the promise of Pitch. It was *wrong*. Everything had gone wrong. Jack tried to force his muscles to lock together, to suppress the shaking, but it didn't help. He couldn't stop. He became aware of his breathing, audible and shallow and uneven. Hyperventilating. Every time he'd hyperventilated in the past few months, Pitch had been there. Jack gasped as something tight and clawed locked around his lungs.

'You're going into shock,' Gwyn said to him, and then turned and motioned someone over. 'Trow, get me a blanket and...'

Jack flinched when he felt calloused fingers briefly touch his forehead.

'I suppose frost spirits don't need blankets,' Gwyn said. He turned back to the trow – a small, wizened creature with tailored clothing that looked as though it had been made of bark. 'Just keep an eye on him. Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid. I have to check on the others.'

Gwyn left.

The trow pulled a chair over, sat next to him, and didn't say anything.

Jack was adrift. He was in a strange place, with strange people. The only anchor he had left was a tiny piece of burnt metal that cut into his palm, holding the likeness of a girl who had died a long, long time ago. He realised that he'd forgotten to ask about Pitch's sword. The sword that the Nightmare King couldn't hold anymore, because it repelled the shadows. Yet another piece of proof that this was his new reality now. This was the way it was going to be.

His teeth didn't stop chattering for a long time.

## The Mountain

It was another two hours before Gwyn found a cave that was large enough for him to make camp. By then, Jack thought it wouldn't be a stretch to say that every step he took was more stagger than purpose.

Gwyn busied himself with making a fire. He drew out the magical pieces of coal from inside a small pack he kept strapped at his side. Jack could tell he was a warrior used to setting up camp for himself. Apparently the magical coal was okay, permitted, because it didn't count as using one's innate powers. Jack thought that was cheating, personally, but what did he know about magical mountains? This was his first.

Jack gingerly slipped the sword off his body, groaning behind closed lips at the pain. He then lay down, face first, in the snow by the cave entrance. He knew he should move the sword under cover; the snow probably wasn't good for the leather. He knew he should – at least – make the effort of sitting with Gwyn for a little while and keeping him company.

Besides, he didn't mind the fire. Sometimes he pretended it was Pitch's body alongside his. It reminded him of hands that didn't cool down as they touched him, of a mouth that warmed his mouth. Jack's eyes slid over to the fire and he shivered.

He hated Gwyn's obsession with making the fires every time they made camp. Maybe this whole stupid journey would be easier if he didn't have the constant reminder of *warmth*. But he doubted it. Nothing had been easy. Nothing had been easy for nearly a month. He hardly recognised himself now. He wasn't the same person anymore. He knew it. Gwyn knew it. They carefully avoided talking about it. At any rate, Gwyn seemed happy with Jack's newfound determination, even if he didn't like what had caused it.

The mountain was dangerous. His thoughts drifted a lot since they'd started climbing it, and he couldn't decide if it was the enchantment of the mountain, or if it was just tiredness finding him and pulling all the things he wanted buried out into the open.

He couldn't get the look on Pitch's face as he'd been consumed by the shadows out of his head. He heard the words 'save me' over and over again, even though he'd never actually heard them in the gymnasium. They pierced him, splintered the shell of ice around his heart. He didn't want to think about it but the mountain dragged it up. The only way Jack knew how to deal with what he was going through was the harden the shell around his heart. To bury himself in anger. Anger at the world, at the Each Uisge, at himself. Always, anger at himself.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't like to think about it.

Jack pressed his face into the snow, breathing in the cold. The first time he'd done it, Gwyn had been disturbed by the behaviour, trying to make him sit up. Jack had explained curtly that it helped him to recharge his energy. After that, Gwyn left him to lie on the snow and saturate his lungs with the freezing cold and didn't bother him again.

He was so tired, but he didn't want to sleep.

Sleep was dangerous.

Nightmares found him.

He didn't like to think about those either.

## 20 Days Earlier:

He was given a bed to sleep in, a decadent construction woven together from living branches and covered in sheets that glowed silver. He eschewed it and slept up in the high branches of the forest cathedral itself. He slept for three days without a break. No nightmares found him.

When he roused, his leg and foot were healing nicely, his throat was almost better. He wondered if there was some magical property in the Seelie Court and the forest cathedral itself that allowed his wounds to knit neatly, that soothed the lacerations he'd made in his own throat. It wouldn't surprise him. Even the tree he had slept upon felt surprisingly good-natured, as though it was radiating calm towards him.

With the fatigue gone, the numbness faded and left distress in its wake. It gave him energy to reflect on what had happened at the gymnasium. He didn't want to, but his mind wouldn't stop. And he *had* to think about it. If he didn't face up to reality, he wouldn't be as determined to get Pitch back. If he wasn't as determined to get Pitch back, then who else would do it? Who else cared as much as he did?

These thoughts, along with many others, plagued him.

He spent most of his time at the Court eavesdropping heavily on the other fae. He moved from branch to branch, picking up bits of conversation. He heard snippets of information, put a story together in his head.

Gulvi and her fae had been successful in rescuing the children at the school she'd offered to defend, but the Glashtyn had escaped. An afrit said he believed that Gulvi had let him go on purpose, and the other fae that Jack listened to laughed in agreement and said it was understandable, given how charming and pretty he was.

Sandy had taken on the Dullahan with a band of other Seelie fae, and successfully liberated the school; though there had been an extremely high number of fae casualties. The Dullahan was bloodthirsty. But he cared less about harming children than he did about harming the fae themselves. In the end, the Dullahan had also escaped.

Jenny Greenteeth had been defeated, her powers removed as punishment. She was no longer a member of Augus' Unseelie Court. Jack felt unexpectedly sad, at that. He remembered overhearing her with the Nain Rouge, how desperate she'd been to get her watery home back. He thought that Jenny Greenteeth had gotten caught up in something too big for her to handle. He could relate. She was the only one he felt sorry for.

Everyone couldn't stop talking about the Nightmare King. The fae talked about him with awe. They talked about how he'd defeated the Nain Rouge. Jack had even heard a man with a bull's head say that he didn't think it was possible for someone to defeat the Nain Rouge. That she'd just gotten too powerful. 'Even Augus could hardly control her.' They talked about the Nightmare King like he'd done everyone a favour. Jack was upset to hear the Nain Rouge was still alive.

If Jack let himself think about it too much, he realised he was angry at the fae. That he maybe even hated them. Not all of them, perhaps. Gwyn wasn't so bad. His soldiers were okay. He liked Ondine, even if her predictions were useless. He even liked Albion, if only because he intervened that one time and stopped everyone else from lecturing Jack. But the rest of them, gossiping and petty, showing their callous disregard for human life even when they were meant to be the good guys, that was hard to take. They were nice enough to him, but it was clear he was an outsider.

On the fourth day, he learned that the Nightmare King and Augus were laying low; though Augus



was still forcing water wights and humans away from fresh water sources. The sales of rainwater tanks had increased. People were buying bottled water in bulk. In some places in the United Kingdom and Europe, fresh water was so hard to come by that a state of crisis had been declared. He also heard that the Nightmare King and Augus had been seen together. *Together.*

It didn't bother Jack as much as he thought it would. It wasn't as though *Pitch* had changed his loyalties, after all, and Jack hadn't fallen in love with a group of malicious shadows. But still, it scraped at him.

On the fifth day, Gulvi entered the Seelie Court, armed and alone, like she belonged there.

Anger swelled and burst through him, it made his body temperature drop.

He flew down and held his staff out at her, ignoring the frightened and indignant cries from other fae around him. Gulvi raised her hands in mock surrender. Her heavy, white wings flared.

'It's against fae law to attack each other within a Court,' she purred. 'We put our arms *down*, here, little one.'

'I'm not fae,' Jack hissed. 'I don't play by your rules.'

Gulvi shrugged, smirked. Her casual disregard for Jack and his staff made him want to shake her, to blast her backwards with frost lightning.

'Did you know?' he said. 'Did you know that Augus wanted to possess one of us with the shadows? Was that the card you were holding back?'

Gulvi's eyes flickered, a rare show of uncertainty. Jack tensed. He *knew* it, he had known it as soon as the Nain Rouge had sent the shadows at him. It was too coordinated, too purposeful. He had played the scenes at the gymnasium in his head over and over again. He kept seeing the way Augus had said something to the Nain Rouge that he wasn't able to catch, the slow nod of encouragement he'd given her when Jack asked for his powers back. And somewhere, in amongst all of his guilt that he'd asked for that, he knew that Augus had been thinking ahead to recruitment. After all, Jack was so vulnerable to the compulsions. It made him shudder every time he thought about it; but Augus had wanted someone who could control the weather, someone who easily manipulated, someone possessed with shadows and ready to be made into a puppet.

Gulvi knew it too. And she hadn't told anyone. She'd even taunted him about the knowledge she'd been holding back before the battle.

'You *did* know!' Jack shouted, and Gulvi withdrew both of her curved knives in a blur of movement, dodging a burst of jagged frost lightning, eyes narrowing. Jack heard fae fleeing, he didn't care. He wasn't fae. It wouldn't matter if he was kicked out. He didn't want to stay here anyway. He had to figure out how to get Pitch back, and he was only wasting his time in this place.

If he stayed focused on his goal, he was almost able to paper over the despair that yawned huge inside of him.

He shot frost lightning at her again, and then flew out of her way when she lunged at him with her knives.

'La, frostling, it was supposed to be *you*,' Gulvi said, grinning as she side-stepped another bolt of the frost.

'You think I don't know that?' Jack said. 'Why didn't you tell us? You're a *monster*.'

‘I’m a *swan*,’ Gulvi said, charging forwards, splaying her wings wide and scowling when Jack dodged and ducked past her. He turned and held his staff in front of himself defensively. ‘And what good would it have done you, hm? You still would have needed to go to make that pretty, pretty snow. Would you have stayed back, privileging yourself over all of those pesky children, as you *should* have done? The outcome would have been *almost* the same. We’d still have a Nightmare King, and,’ she laughed sweetly, ‘a lot more dead children.’

Jack thrust his staff forward and summoned frost lightning from his core. His skin felt blistered with anger, it felt like frostbite and ice burns shooting up and down his body. He was ready to discharge when Gwyn suddenly appeared between the two of them, hands out, a shocked look on his face. Jack pulled his staff back quickly, and the building tension inside of him displaced throughout his whole body like an aftershock.

‘What *is* it with you two?!’ Gwyn shouted. ‘Jack, we lay our arms *down* in the Seelie Court. Fae or not, that’s the law. Gulvi, I could *banish* you for allowing yourself to be provoked like this!’

‘Here he is,’ Gulvi spat at Jack, ‘your Seelie King, apparently ready to protect you from the big, scary, swan-maiden that I am.’

‘I’m not here to protect *him*,’ Gwyn said, glaring at Gulvi. ‘I’m looking out for *you*. You remember what he was like during the Wild Hunt. Leave him alone.’

Gulvi lowered her daggers, and Jack lowered his staff slowly, wondering where she lived or nested. He wondered if it was a place he could freeze over, call blizzards to. He could get the winds to pick up her scent, he could track her down, he could freeze her wings in mid-flight if he wanted to, he could-

He tore his eyes away from her and forced himself to focus on Gwyn.

‘Did you know?’ Jack said, voice trembling, wishing he could just rip the truth from the Seelie King’s mind. ‘Did you know that August was planning on possessing one of us?’

‘*You*. He wanted it to be *you*.’ Gulvi hissed, and Jack’s hand clenched so hard on his staff that his hand cramped.

‘No, I didn’t know,’ Gwyn said, looking over at Gulvi. Jack wanted him to get angry, wanted him to banish her as he’d said he could. But Gwyn simply looked at her measuringly and then sighed. ‘But I’m not surprised. Leave Gulvi alone. She is what she is, Jack. Would it have changed anything, if you had known?’

Jack stared at Gulvi, instead of Gwyn. He tried to piece it all together in his mind. Would he have stayed back at the Workshop, while children were in danger? No. Pitch would have tried to make him stay behind, and he still wouldn’t have listened. And it wasn’t as though he could have made Pitch stay behind. And it wasn’t as though they would have forgiven themselves for staying in the Workshop while everyone else fought so hard around them. They were both necessary to make the snow that could fight back against the shadows. If Gulvi had told him that August wanted to possess him with the shadows, it may have made him more wary. Would Pitch have still been possessed? Was Pitch the back-up plan?

Jack blinked hard. They had been lambs for the slaughter. There was nothing he could have done differently. He wouldn’t have left children to die in a school. He would have still gone, he would have been more frightened, he may have even been less useful.

He remembered Pitch as he leaned against the door, voice tainted with fear. *We’re not ready. We’ll*

*never be ready.*

‘There, see? You realise,’ Gulvi said, voice uncharacteristically brittle. ‘What would you have done? How hopeless would you have felt, knowing that was waiting for you? Schools are saved, humans will live; the Nain Rouge and Jenny Greenteeth are no longer thorns in our side. I-’

‘*Don’t* sell it to me like you were doing me a favour. You’re nothing more than a-’

‘*Watch it,*’ Gwyn said, and Jack bristled, stepped back from the both of them. ‘If anyone is going to deal with Gulvi, it is going to be me. That is how it works here, Jack. You’re in *my* Court and you live by my laws. Gulvi, I want you to come with me. It’s past time we had a chat.’

Gulvi looked over her shoulder twice as she followed Gwyn. The first time, she looked smug. The second time, there was something of sympathy in her dark, liquid eyes.

\*

### **17 Days Earlier:**

Night never settled properly over the forest cathedral. The sky only ever deepened to a violet-grey twilight. Stars blinked overhead, but it wasn’t the same as the night that lay itself over the earth that Jack was familiar with.

One evening, Jack wandered aimlessly. He was hollowed out. Would he always be hollowed out? He didn’t even know, anymore, what equilibrium was supposed to feel like.

Of all the things that had been bothering him, the idea of dying no longer seemed the worst. He worried – most of all – that he would not be able to save Pitch before the rest of his soul leaked away. He had nightmares of being so close, so *close*, and falling asleep never to wake up again, while Pitch called out his name. Every time he felt close to breaking down – which was far too often – he would find that spider’s thread of resolve and strengthen it, he would sink himself into determination. He made Pitch his priority. He looked after himself because he knew he needed to be as well as possible to get him back.

He wandered through the Seelie Court, trying to think of what he would do next. Planning was not his forte, but he needed to attempt to think ahead.

Hours passed as he meandered under the watchful twilight. Eventually he ended up in a section of the forest maze where the trees broadened and the spaces between them narrowed together. He navigated them absently, and ended up at an entrance barred with loosely hanging vines covered in sweet-scented red blossoms. He ducked under the vines and entered a room of moss, of shed antlers strewn in piles over the soft forest floor, of low stools covered in lichen. He sat down on one and looked up to see how much of the twilight pressed through. But he saw no twilight at all, the branches were too thickly intertwined. Small, floating lights lending a yellowed glow to the room. A white owl looked down at him.

The Seelie Court was a strange place. It was not in the human world. He knew that much. Like North’s Workshop or Toothiana’s palace or Bunnymund’s underground wonderland, it existed in some liminal, in-between space.

Gwyn walked through an adjoining entrance, wearing simple olive green breeches and a half-unlaced shirt, and stopped dead when he saw Jack. His eyes widened, he looked around, checking to see if anyone else was in the room with them.

‘What are you doing here? How did you get here?’

Jack rubbed a hand over his forehead.

‘I was just...I don’t know. I was just walking around. And then I got here. Why?’

‘These are my private rooms,’ Gwyn said, forehead creasing. ‘It’s not easy for people to find their way here. There are enchantments specifically so that they *don’t*.’

‘Sorry,’ Jack said, standing up. ‘I’ll go. I didn’t know this-’

‘No, wait. If you’re here, there’s a reason for it. Talk to me.’

Jack swallowed. He wasn’t sure how to read Gwyn. Seeing him bloody and dirty on the battlefield, seeing him feral and fey during the Wild Hunt, seeing him uphold fae justice in a cold, aloof manner...it didn’t help him understand Gwyn at all. And now he was supposed to accept that this strange, mossy cavern with its lichen stools and shed antlers were part of Gwyn’s private rooms? What did he do with all the shed antlers, anyway?

‘Talk to me,’ Gwyn repeated again, his voice quieter now.

‘What now?’ Jack said. ‘What do we do now? We have to do something, right?’

‘Jack, it’s only been a little over a week, you-’

Only a week. It felt like years had passed. But then, sometimes it felt like only minutes ago that he had fallen asleep in Pitch’s arms. Time not only meant nothing to him, it didn’t even make sense anymore.

‘We have to save him,’ Jack insisted.

‘Jack, look, I liked the man, but-’

‘And you *have* to help me,’ Jack said, too desperate to be aware of his audacity. ‘You have to help me, because you *used* us. And you *owe* us. You can’t tell me he wasn’t one of your most valuable weapons. You must want him back too. You know it’s important. I saw how quickly the Nightmare King put you on your knees. We have to find a way to turn him back into Pitch. If we can do that, it’ll be easier the second time around. Jenny Greenteeth is demoted. The Nain Rouge is no longer a member of the Court. You-’

‘Stop,’ Gwyn said, holding up a hand imperially. And then he looked at it in affront, and dropped it to his side again. It was moments like that, where Jack wondered if Gwyn even liked who he was. He sometimes seemed horrified by the fact that he was the Seelie King.

‘You-’

‘*Stop*,’ Gwyn said. ‘Listen. I did use you. Both of you. He is a valuable weapon. Just as he is an incredible enemy. But I’m running out of ideas; I used most of them at the schools and August knows that. And you need rest, Jack. You look like hell.’

‘How much rest is enough rest? I could end up resting until I’m dead, okay? Screw rest. If you don’t want to help me, just tell me. I’m doing this with or without you.’

Gwyn closed his eyes, his lips thinned. It was a gesture that reminded him suddenly, awfully, of Pitch. Long-suffering Pitch, every time Jack said something that pained him. Jack turned, fist pressing hard to his chest.

*It doesn't hurt, because you're going to get him back, and that's all that matters.*

When he turned back, Gwyn watched him.

'You don't like me much, do you?' he said, and Jack felt a flash of irritation. And then he couldn't help but smile, though it was darker than the ones he used to offer.

'Not heaps. But hey, I'm not one to throw any tool out of my toolbox.'

At that, Gwyn tilted his head back and laughed. It was a full-bodied sound, filled with that awful charm that skated up Jack's skin and left him feeling exposed. When Gwyn was done, he looked back and there was something of that feral, game spark in his eyes.

'Well said, Jack. Well said. Let's chat then, shall we?'

\*

## **The Mountain**

Jack struck at whatever pushed him. He was *tired*. He needed *sleep*. The pushing returned, harder this time, so that Jack rocked back and forth in the snow where he lay. Mounds of it fell off him, and he mumbled something and lashed out again. This time he made heavy contact. Something withdrew. Jack thought he was done. He hoped he'd be left alone. He just wanted to sleep.

The hands returned, and then one cuffed him hard across the back of the head. Pain exploded at the back of his skull.

'What the *hell*?' Jack shouted, awake, pushing himself upright and groaning as his stiff, bruised shoulders creaked in discomfort. 'Oh, that stupid *sword*.'

'You're getting harder and harder to rouse,' Gwyn said, as Jack rubbed at the back of his head. Gwyn hit *hard*. 'Come. This was your idea. We don't have much time left to reach the summit.'

He held out Pitch's sword to Jack. The leather strap and heavy sheath and sword made Jack's shoulders hurt pre-emptively. Jack wished – fervently – that Gwyn could just shoulder it for him. Just for a little while.

But no, that wasn't the invisible contract he'd made with these mountain wights, as soon as he'd stepped foot on the path leading up to their home.

Almost as though he'd read his mind, Gwyn thrust the sword at Jack again. Jack took it, arms trembling under its weight. He pulled it towards himself and rested the hilt against his chest, dreading the moment when he would put it on again. He hadn't dared look under his sweatshirt. He was starting to think the strap had cut through the skin anyway.

'You can sleep as long as you want once we're off this forsaken mountain. But you know the laws. You carry the weapon you want seen to. No powers voluntarily used. We must reach the summit in three days. We do not have much of those three days left, and I have let you sleep too long already.'

'If you *hit* me again, I will-'

'Must I remind you why we're doing this?' Gwyn snapped back. 'I do not have to be here with you. I have many other things I could be doing with my time!'

Jack stared at him in shock, and then wrapped his arms around the sword leaning against him. If he

pretended, it was almost like Pitch was...

*No, you can't do this. You don't have time for this.*

Jack made a thin sound that was whipped away by the blizzard. Gwyn was right. Gwyn was almost always right. Jack felt like nothing more than a child around him. He was the one who had asked for this. Gwyn didn't have to be here with him. He'd only offered because he wanted to make sure Jack would be as safe as possible. If he hadn't been there, Jack would have used his powers by now, he would have fallen off the side of the mountain, he would have slept past the three day deadline to reach the summit.

He needed Gwyn.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said, voice small.

'No,' Gwyn said, stepping forward and picking up the sword. He stepped even closer and slid the strap carefully onto Jack's body. Jack's throat closed on a cry as it settled over one shoulder and underneath the other arm. He didn't think he could face more climbing, more of the infernal rubbing against his back and shoulders and chest. 'I apologise for being coarse.'

Jack looked up at him, and Gwyn returned the gaze.

'You've changed,' Gwyn said, softly. Jack opened his mouth to apologise again, and Gwyn shook his head. 'You've had to.'

He turned around and started walking up the mountain path again without looking back.

Jack took a deep breath, steeled himself against his fatigue, against the horrible thoughts in his head, the soreness in his body, and followed.

\*

## **12 Days Earlier:**

Reports that the Nightmare King was sending forth nightmares out to those who were on the 'wrong side' came flooding in. Gwyn and Jack were unaffected, protected by the many wards around the Seelie Court. But knowing that the Nightmare King was out there, back to his old tricks, made his skin crawl. There were many things that he didn't want to experience, and nightmares directly seeded by the Nightmare King were one of them. His own nightmares were bad enough.

Jack hadn't realised that one of the reasons that Gwyn had left him immediately after the battle in the gymnasium, was to retrieve Pitch's sword. The leather strap, the sheath and the sword were still covered in flecks of blood, and after cleaning it with some chamois he borrowed from Gwyn, Jack traced his fingers gently over the faint language mapped into that strange, pale steel. Pitch's fingers had moved lovingly over the same sword. They had polished the blade, cleaned it, kept the sheath in good condition, checked over the leather. Pitch had treated it like a cousin to the locket. Invaluable, important.

Jack pulled the sword out of the sheath. It was heavy, and when he tried to lift it with both hands, he staggered backwards at its weight. It was *really heavy*. He wondered at Pitch's strength, at his ability to move lightly, like a dancer, with a weapon that made Jack feel like he was lifting one half of a twelve-seater table made of lead.

He slid the sword back in its sheath and then awkwardly attempted to pull it over his shoulder and under his other arm, the way Pitch had always done it. It didn't fit well at all. Jack felt like he'd

just tugged a boulder onto his back.

Gwyn walked in to his rooms, brushing yellow flower petals out of his hair and off his shoulders. He laughed out loud when he saw Jack.

‘That does not suit you,’ Gwyn said, and Jack gritted his teeth and forced himself to stand upright, only to find his centre of gravity so thrown off, that he pitched into the wall. He half-expected Gwyn to help, but Gwyn seemed to find it more important to keep laughing.

‘It’s so great that I amuse you,’ Jack mumbled as he slipped out of the leather strap and rolled his shoulders, awkwardly.

Jack looked at the sword, the strap, wondered if he could ask what had been playing on his mind. He’d had a stupid idea a few days ago and now it wouldn’t leave him alone. Gwyn had told him to brainstorm, but he probably hadn’t meant *this*.

‘Do you know anyone who could break this down and remake it into something different?’ Jack said, and Gwyn stopped laughing, face turning cold and serious faster than Jack thought a face could.

‘That’s a very special sword. Do you know what you’re asking?’

‘If you’re asking me whether it’s more important to keep a stupid sword and have the Nightmare King...or whether it’s more important to break it down and *maybe* get an advantage in getting Pitch back, then I think you know my answer,’ Jack said, stubbornly.

Gwyn sat down on one of the lichen stools heavily, staring at the sword.

‘There has never been a weapon like it on this planet. And there likely never will be again. And you want to...’

‘Break it down. Into new things. The metal repels the shadows. I think it’s more important that we can *use* it. I mean, you already have a sword that carries the golden light. *I* want to be able to use it. Isn’t that your theory? Making the most out of what you’ve got available?’

‘Yes, but-’

‘Seriously, you’re finding *this* difficult?’ Jack said, surprised. ‘The one who seems to have no problem ordering us all around in a battlefield doesn’t want to hurt a freaking sword? It’s not alive, you know.’

Gwyn looked like he wanted to argue the point, but he subsided, looking down at his hands.

‘Pitch may not forgive this,’ Gwyn said warily.

‘If this gets Pitch back, I don’t *care*,’ Jack said, and it almost sounded convincing. He did care. His hand clenched around the leather strap automatically, because he hated the ideas he came up with sometimes. He hated *this* idea.

‘I do know of some dwarves who specialise in rare metals. In fact they made my sword. But you’re not going to like them much. There are rules about what they’ll work with, and why. And it’s a hard journey to get there. One I’m not sure you’re capable of. You’re very weak. And even if you get there, they might still turn you away. I once went to get a second sword made, and they told me to leave in no uncertain terms. They’re...brusque.’

‘Which means something, if you’re saying it,’ Jack said.

He expected Gwyn to come back with something wry or witty, but he didn’t. That was more Pitch’s domain. Having Gwyn around was never easy. He was often busy, he was abrupt and demanding. But every now and then he’d do something which reminded him of Pitch, and it made him want to run halfway across the world and hide. It made him want to stay by Gwyn’s side, at least until Pitch was back. He hoped Gwyn would never realise that Jack sometimes thought of him as a weak, substitute Pitch.

‘Jack,’ Gwyn said, his tone serious. ‘Have you thought about what you will do if we can’t get him back?’

Jack’s mouth went dry. He shivered.

‘No, it’s not an option.’

‘What if we destroy the shadows, and there’s nothing of him left? Don’t misunderstand me. I have immense respect for the warrior I came to know as we trained together. If anyone is capable of withstanding that onslaught of internal darkness, it will be him. But what if he can’t this time? What if-’

Gwyn broke off when he saw the look on Jack’s face. He stood abruptly and cleared his throat.

‘It doesn’t do to dwell on these things,’ Gwyn said, and Jack stared at him, numb, hurt.

‘Then *don’t*.’

\*

## **The Mountain**

The closer they got to the summit, the more despair threatened to choke him. It was a wild blizzard outside, a relentless battle inside of himself too.

Even if he could get the sword broken down and changed the way he wanted, who was to say it would even work? It was only a small step in a larger plan that didn’t exist yet. Even if the dwarves didn’t turn him away, even if they accepted him, why was he doing this? Why was Gwyn coming with him on such a harebrained scheme? Was everyone really so desperate? Was their situation really so dire?

Jack had fallen down many times that day, and his knees and palms were bruised. The leather strap had worn his skin so raw that it looked like he had carpet burn anywhere the strap had touched him. He had a bruise angled down his back that was livid and – according to Gwyn – growing blacker. Jack wasn’t sure when Gwyn had seen it, and suspected that Gwyn had been checking on him while he slept.

He was starting think that maybe Gwyn was just *awkward*. And once he realised that, he couldn’t stop seeing signs of it. Beneath the fae charm, beneath his ability to command an army, he was surprisingly bad at interpersonal interactions. He hadn’t wanted to be the King of the Seelie fae, the leader of their Court, and Jack was starting to think it was because his idea of a good day was spending it alone in a forest; probably hunting something. He didn’t like small talk, he thought sparring was a good way of bonding with someone, he didn’t know how to show empathy and yet – if him checking on Jack’s wounds was anything to go by – he clearly cared. He had taken time away from the Seelie Court to come with Jack on this journey, knowing that he also couldn’t leave the mountain once he’d set foot upon it.



Gwyn was...generous, Jack realised.

Generous and awkward and stoic and a warrior. Like *that* didn't remind him of anyone he knew.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself onwards. He didn't want to fall again. He was so tired of gravity playing tricks on him. He was going to spend weeks in the air once he was off the mountain. Weeks.

Hours passed and Jack felt like he was in a trance. He wanted to stop walking, he definitely wanted to stop falling down, but he kept doing both. He had forced himself up so many times that he was starting to feel like it was the way he normally walked around.

Jack wasn't looking, fell backwards when he walked into Gwyn, who had halted. Gwyn spun to catch him, but he was too late, and Jack landed heavily, awkwardly on his back. Pain shot through his body, splintered into his spine, and he choked down a scream. A moment later he felt a thick, oozing wetness trickling down his skin, soaking into his sweatshirt.

Even through the fabric of his hoodie, the sword, the scabbard, the leather strap – they had all finally cut through his skin.

He let Gwyn pull him into a sitting position, let Gwyn shift the strap and the sword to try and make it more comfortable. It made hardly any difference. There was no part of him that didn't hurt. He was trembling again. He was getting tired of these hardened warrior types seeing him at his worst. He forced himself to his knees and then staggered upright again, his back still bleeding.

He didn't have anything to say. Once he might have made some sort of wry joke about it, but words deserted him. He just wanted to get it *done*.

'We're here,' Gwyn said, and Jack blinked. 'The entrance is just over there.'

Gwyn pointed, and through the incessant blizzard, Jack saw a small, orange glow of light.

'What now?' Jack said, and then blinked his eyes clear as a shadowy figure approached them. She became clearer and clearer through the snowfall. She wore the same, pale gleaming armour that Gwyn did. She had a huge, double-bladed axe strapped to her back, and her hair was short and spiky. She was like no other dwarf Jack had ever met. She was taller than he was, solidly built, with shoulders that bulged and hands blackened with soot.

When she saw Gwyn, she smiled and pushed him hard on the shoulder in some kind of antagonistic greeting. Gwyn pushed back and her eyes lit up. Jack hoped he wasn't going to have to deal with the same thing, because he was pretty sure he'd be flung backwards and land on his back again. The woman took one look at him, one look at the hilt of the sword over his shoulder, and frowned.

'I'm Iskala, one of the Glasera dwarves. And that is not your sword.'

*You think?*

'Nope,' Jack managed, and Iskala nodded.

'So you made it to the top of our mountain with that on your back?'

She was waiting for a response, even though it was obvious that was just what he'd done. If, at any point, he'd let Gwyn carry it, they would never have been allowed to reach the summit in the first place.

‘Yep,’ he said.

‘Then we had best get you to the Head Smith, so you can tell us what you want.’

She turned and Gwyn followed. Jack took a deep breath, ignored how blood felt frozen to his skin, and forced himself onward.

\*

### **5 Days Earlier:**

The Workshop was just as Jack remembered it. It was noisy and bright, colourful and filled with industrious yeti, elves that got underfoot, an abundance of Christmas cookies, toy prototypes and magical, wondrous things.

Jack missed the days when he felt awe upon seeing it. He knew how much he’d changed since the battle at the school, when he looked around and thought nothing except that it was very loud, and not very helpful.

He went first to Sandy. He had missed all of the Guardians, but he’d thought of Sandy and his loving silences the most. Sandy wasn’t like the fae, and he wasn’t like any of the other Guardians. He was quintessentially himself. Even looking at him or thinking about him reminded Jack of good dreams, and those were in poor supply.

However, when he reached the top of the tower where Sandy slept; Sandy wasn’t there. Jack breathed through his disappointment, taking in the empty golden cloud. He smiled weakly when he saw the thick, spiral of black above it.

‘Mora,’ he said, and the spiral slowed and then sped up again in response. There was a lot more sand now. It wouldn’t be long, he realised, before he would hopefully see her again. He didn’t allow himself to think about her too much, in case it didn’t work, in case Sandy couldn’t make it happen. But seeing the spiralling black sand, he could feel her, even from here. It was her personality. She called to him.

He walked over and placed his hands up to the sand like someone might warm their hands before a fire.

‘Not long now,’ he said, and the sand brushed his palms.

‘I have to go away, for a little while. But I’ll be back for you as soon as I can.’

The black sand swept around his fingers, curled around his wrists. He almost thought he could feel her forehead against his chest. Even now, she was strong enough to inspire a small amount of fear, a hiccup of it burst inside of him like a soap bubble, and he almost laughed to feel it again. It was *Mora*.

He stayed with her for a few more minutes, before pulling away. He wished he could have seen Sandy.

North met him outside the tower, having been informed by the yeti that he was there. He opened his arms for a hug, but Jack stepped back warily, knowing the power that touch had to break him apart. Gwyn had warned him that it was wise to keep himself as together as possible before scaling the mountain.

North dropped his arms and sighed. Jack saw bags under his eyes. He looked exhausted.

'You look tired,' he said. 'Is it because of the Nightmare King?'

'Mm, yes. Nothing I am not handling.'

The warm smile that North offered was genuine, and Jack returned it, even as he knew his smile was a shadow of its former self.

'I'm going to be gone for a few days. I'm.- Well it might not work, but I'm going to be trying something.'

'Do you need company?' North said, and Jack shook his head.

'Gwyn is coming with me. So it'll be fine. I just wanted to let you guys know, in case you looked for me and couldn't...'

North nodded. Jack felt a distance between them he knew he'd created. In not accepting North's hugs, in disappearing after the battle in the gymnasium, even now in the way he talked to him. He just couldn't afford to soften, he couldn't offer even that much of himself. Already, the idea of acting the way he used to even a month ago was abhorrent. That was not a Jack who could defeat this incarnation of the Nightmare King, and if Jack wanted Pitch back, he'd have to become someone who could.

'I never thought I'd say this,' North said, 'but I miss Pitch. The Nightmare King as he is now reminds me of...darker times. It must have been hard for Pitch to let himself become that, so that you wouldn't have to.'

Jack thought he would hurt upon hearing that, he thought he'd have to pull himself together, force himself to be strong. But he was already so cold inside that he felt almost nothing at all. Whatever ice he commanded had crept inside him and frozen him from the inside out.

'Bunnymund is here, you should say farewell to him too,' North said, and Jack felt his lips compress, he bit his tongue.

'Maybe,' Jack said, finally.

'It would have been good for him to have seen some of the things I saw. For him to have seen the way Pitch cared for you,' North said. 'We have been talking to him, even Tooth. I think he is dealing with some wounds from a long time ago, Jack, and you have been caught in the fiery cross.'

Jack squinted at that. *The fiery...what?*

'Oh! You mean the crossfire?'

'Yes, exactly.'

'Right. Yeah. Well, maybe. It's complicated. Pitch thinks I should talk to him too, I mean, that was before everything, but, he *thought* I should...'

Jack stumbled to a halt. A hairline crack appeared in the ice he enveloped his feelings in. North stepped forwards to place a hand on his arm – one of those huge, gentle hands – and Jack stumbled backwards.

'Yeah,' Jack heard himself say, 'I'll go find Bunny. And I'll check in once I'm back. I can't stay at the Seelie Court forever, they're weird over there.'

He couldn't tell the expression on North's face. Pity? Horror? He couldn't afford to let himself get caught up in the threat of heart to heart conversation. Maybe once Pitch was back, he'd consider it, but now was not the time. He schooled his face to what he hoped was a calm expression.

'We just want to help, Jack,' North said, and Jack nodded.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said.

'Ah, no, Jack. Again, it is not you who is needing to be sorry this time,' North said. He offered it on a rueful, sad smile, one that forced his eyes shut, tightened his lips more than a smile should.

Jack couldn't stand it any longer. He floated away, dodging a couple of yeti as he went. The wind picked up the scent of Bunnymund for him, and he followed it into the round-table room, where Bunnymund was poring over an ancient map that showed continents and countries he'd never seen before. The fur on Bunnymund's injured leg was growing in slowly.

Jack didn't want to be angry about it, but he was. Because Pitch had decided to heal Bunnymund, they'd never even had a chance of making the golden storm clouds inside the gymnasium. And maybe it wouldn't have helped. Jack told himself not to be angry about it.

Bunnymund looked up from his map and didn't seem surprised to see Jack there. His eyes narrowed, his arms tensed, and that was it.

'Your boyfriend has a deft touch with nightmares,' Bunnymund said, breaking the silence.

Jack sighed.

'He's not my boyfriend, because he's not *Pitch*.'

'This again,' Bunnymund said, and Jack floated over and perched in the middle of the round table, forcing Bunnymund to look up at him.

'North said all the Guardians had been talking to you, but I see it hasn't really helped. It's funny though, you know. You throwing stones while reaping the benefits of him healing you, right? I don't get you at all.'

Bunnymund scowled, didn't say anything.

'Is it so hard to separate the Nightmare King from the Pitch he became? Because I find it pretty easy.'

'I was right though,' Bunnymund said, changing tack. 'You got hurt.'

Jack laughed, standing on the table and pacing it.

'Why do you care so much, when *you* didn't care about hurting me before I became a Guardian? Why do you get to pick and choose what matters to you? I don't get you at all. And I don't really want to. I came to tell you that I was going away for a few days, because North said I should, but honestly, I'm starting to think that you and I just aren't supposed to be friends.'

Jack hopped off the table and stilled when he felt a paw on his upper arm. He turned and Bunnymund withdrew it straight away, a surprised look on his face. His whiskers drooped, his eyes were wide.

'What do you mean? Have you gone around the twist? When did I hurt you before you became a

Guardian?’

Jack couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

‘Don’t play dumb, rabbit. I’m not in the mood.’

‘Just tell me. What do you mean?’ Bunnymund’s ears perked in realisation, he tilted his head back. ‘Is this about- Crikey, is this about the first time we met? Toughen up, you wally. After all this time, you’re sore at me because of *that*?’

‘You ever wonder why I messed with Easter, but I didn’t really bother messing with Christmas, or any of the other major holidays?’ Jack said, tasting bitterness in his mouth. ‘I tried to be your friend, I thought ‘Hey, you know, he’s a giant rabbit who paints eggs for children and loves chocolate, he seems like the kind of...‘

Jack took a deep breath. Another. He didn’t feel like finishing that sentence. *He seems like the kind of spirit who might be able to put up with me for a little while.*

‘So I was short with you a few times,’ Bunnymund said, confused, ‘I don’t understand. Why are you being so precious about it?’

‘Do you know how many friends I had, before I met you?’ Jack said, wanting to scratch the pain out of himself. Maybe if he finally just *told* Bunnymund, he wouldn’t have to think about it anymore. He already had enough things to worry about.

‘I don’t bloody know, do I? Hundreds? With all your larrikin ways it wouldn’t surprise me. Even without the children. Some spirits love snow days, after all.’

‘I had none, Bunny,’ Jack said, quietly. ‘And it turns out I didn’t have one after I met you, either.’

Bunnymund stared at him in disbelief.

‘I mean I clearly misread you from the start,’ Jack said, avoiding eye-contact and looking out of the door he’d entered through. ‘I thought you’d be...fun. Not grumpy and short-tempered and you know, sometimes a little violent. And when you saw that none of the children believed in me, that time, you told me that I *deserved* that, because I didn’t take my responsibilities *seriously* enough. And when I asked you ‘What responsibilities?’ because you know, maybe I wanted to learn something about myself? Do you remember what you said?’

The giant rabbit took a step backwards and looked over at the map, but he was looking through it, seeing a different time, a different place.

‘You didn’t act like someone who wanted to be friends,’ Bunnymund said, but he sounded uncertain.

‘I didn’t know what I was doing,’ Jack laughed again, the sound harsh even to his own ears. ‘I still don’t know what I’m doing. But you know what I *do* know? I know that Pitch and the Nightmare King aren’t the same. I know that Pitch *did* save me. I’m sorry everyone is now suffering the consequences for that. I really am. And you should know that I take my responsibilities pretty seriously, these days, actually. And that I’m working really hard to make sure that this is temporary. And maybe you’ll never believe in Pitch, or...or me, and North says you’re dealing with a lot of...’

Jack couldn’t finish. He wanted to say it was okay, that he didn’t mind, that he understood. He told himself that he *wasn’t* angry. That Bunnymund hadn’t taken up precious moments of Pitch’s time.

In a last ditch effort to make his mind shut up, he told himself that Pitch hadn't wasted his golden light on Bunnymund's leg. He *hadn't*. He told himself that Bunnymund wasn't the reason that Pitch's light had guttered and died when it did.

A gasp ripped out of his throat, and he closed his mouth around it too late.

'What is it?' Bunnymund said, confused, eyes wide, paws out like he wanted to offer something but didn't know how.

'I have to go,' Jack said. He imagined ice hardening around his heart, imagined it tempered and not brittle, the kind of ice that didn't melt in sunlight, the kind of ice that wouldn't crack under pressure. Coming back to the Workshop before his journey with Gwyn had been a mistake.

He backed away from Bunnymund, then turned and escaped the toy factory. It was harder to wipe the concerned, dazed expression on Bunnymund's face from his mind than he thought it would be.

\*

## **The Mountain**

The Glasera dwarf, Iskala, led Gwyn and Jack into the summit of the mountain itself. It was hot and stifling as furnaces that stretched deep down into the bowels of the earth generated the heat necessary to work with and temper the most magical of metals. The Glasera themselves were an unfriendly lot, staring with open mistrust at Gwyn and Jack. He felt their glares on his back after he'd passed them, resisted the urge to look back.

Even Gwyn was treated like he wasn't welcome, which he didn't seem to mind. Gwyn had warned Jack multiple times that the Glasera were a proud people who did not welcome strangers easily.

Iskala brought them to a table made of pale blue metal, and in front of it stood a huge blacksmith, tools hanging from a broad belt, a hard look etched into the lines on his face.

'Show me the sword,' he said, and Jack looked over at Gwyn, who nodded.

Jack reached up to pull the strap off and hunched over from the pain that rippled through him. He ground his teeth together, told himself that the quicker he did it, the quicker it would be over and done with. He could already feel fresh blood oozing down his back.

He stared at the floor and grabbed the leather strap, swinging the sword up and over his shoulders. It took all of his energy to lift it, and all of his strength not to cry out as he slammed the whole thing down on the table. The scabbard clashed with the metal and it created a huge, booming clang that reverberated around them. Jack's ears were still ringing when he looked up.

'Now,' the blacksmith said, looking at the sword and strap, and then looking back up at Jack. 'Tell me what you want done with it, and I'll tell you what your chances are.'

'I want...' Jack looked at the hilt of the sword, the sheath, the strap itself; all carefully made, all priceless. *Pitch's sword*. He couldn't afford to have second thoughts. Not now. He'd gone through three days of climbing up a mountain without his powers, Gwyn was still wearing his staff strapped to his back. He'd put himself through hell for this plan and he'd see it through, even if the Glasera said no, even if it meant that Pitch might not forgive him for it.

Jack turned to Gwyn to ask for his staff, but Gwyn understood and removed it quickly. He handed it back to Jack, who lowered it onto the table next to the sword. Then, pressing his lips together against the pain as the muscles in his shoulders shifted, he slid the sword out of its sheath. The

blacksmith's eyes lit up when he saw the quality of the metal, but he did not reach out to touch it as Gwyn had wanted to, the first time he'd seen it.

Jack reached into the pocket of his pants, and his fingers traced a small, misshapen locket.

He took a deep breath, ran over the words he'd been composing in his head for three days now, and decided they would have to do.

'The warrior who wielded this sword has been possessed by the shadows that this sword repels. I want to know if you can break down the metal this sword is made of, and re-incorporate it into my staff, so that I can use it too. The sword is too heavy for me. But if you attached it to the outside of my staff, it wouldn't be. I know the metal won't save him on its own,' Jack said, his voice catching, 'but it might help. And honestly, I'll take whatever I can get at this point. So, can you help me?'

# The Centre Has Changed

## Chapter Notes

Wow, thank you for all the kudos / comments and subscribes and bookmarks seriously. <3 You guys are the greatest fans ever.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack ached. His back was a mess. Pain filtered through from a great distance, as though he orbited himself. Jack watched Iskala and the Head Smith argue passionately in a language he'd never heard before and had no hope of pronouncing; it sounded like a combination of consonants and rocks falling down cliff faces. It became obvious that Iskala was arguing in favour of Jack, and that the Head Smith was arguing against, gesticulating wildly at the staff and the sword.

Jack's eyes slipped to see how Gwyn was reacting, when they escalated into a full-blown yelling match. He was watching them, face impassive. His hands were relaxed by his sides. Gwyn gave the impression that this was normal. Jack turned back and decided to wait it out.

Eventually the Head Smith turned back and eyed the sword, then frowned at Jack. His face was ruddy from shouting for so long, his eyes black and bright.

'Tell us why should we destroy a sword so perfectly made as this, for a situation like yours? You think we haven't heard of the Nightmare King? How powerful he is? Why should I destroy a work of art, when you have so little of chance on your side? If you presented me with a lesser weapon – well...I don't know, you didn't present me with a lesser weapon did you? You presented me with this. This is *not* a lesser weapon. I am the only one out of all of the Glasera who can work a metal like this, and I'm not going to d-'

'The sword has already agreed,' Iskala interrupted, stubbornly. The Head Smith glared at her.

Jack resisted the urge to point out that the sword couldn't speak, that it wasn't a person, and that Pitch had explicitly said, months ago, that it didn't have any charms or magic or spirits sealed into it. It couldn't *agree*. He kept his mouth shut, because apparently Iskala thought the sword was on his side, and if that was her argument, he could pretend the sword had an opinion on the matter.

'Turn around,' Iskala said to Jack. She gestured at him in brusque encouragement when he hesitated. Jack presented his back to the Head Smith, knowing that blood had soaked through the fabric.

'You see?' Iskala said. 'The sword started without us, has already demanded its sacrifice. So will I be collecting his blood now? Or later?'

'Wait, what?' Jack said. 'You're collecting my what?'

Jack flinched when Iskala's broad, strong hands started slowly pulling up the back of his sweatshirt, exposing his cold skin to the hot, dry air. He bit the inside of his lip hard when the material caught on frozen blood and wouldn't shift any higher without force. Iskala stopped pulling, it seemed that she had exposed enough damage. Gwyn hissed when he saw the state of Jack's back, but Iskala grunted with approval.



‘You see? Blood. Taken by the *sword*. You know what that means.’

‘It means a scrawny boy carried a sword too heavy for him, Iskala, and that’s *all* it means,’ the Head Smith growled, but he didn’t sound certain.

‘On *our* mountain? Even you cannot turn this down. And if you do, I’ll have you brought up before the Elders.’

‘Anyone ever tell you you’re worse than a den of starving bears?’ The Head Smith walked around the table and poked at the wound, but Jack was so far away from his pain that he didn’t react. The Head Smith lowered the material quickly, as though disturbed, and Jack wondered what his back looked like. He didn’t even want to guess. Bruises on top of bruises maybe. Blood on top of that.

‘Fine. Let’s talk terms,’ the Head Smith said, and picked up Jack’s staff, hefted it. ‘I assume you want to still be able to channel your own power through this?’

‘That’s kind of the point,’ Jack said, and then winced. *Don’t piss the mountain dwarves off, pretty sure that’s not going go down well.*

The Head Smith took Jack’s attitude in his stride, turning the staff in his hand and then looking back at the sword speculatively.

‘Then we won’t need much of the metal. So.’ He put down the staff and took a piece of wax crayon out of a leather satchel at his waist, and drew a line across the sword’s blade, bisecting it with a line of oily darkness. Jack felt a flare of anxiety move through him. He almost reached out and asked the Head Smith to stop. Jack realised that what he was asking for was far worse than a simple line of crayon. *Way, way worse.*

‘What next?’ the Head Smith said.

Jack stared down at the sword, at the metal left over. He hadn’t expected there to be so much. He had hoped his staff wouldn’t need too much of the sword to be able to repel the shadows. The idea of what to do with the rest of the blade had played on his mind for days.

‘Are you sure that’s going to be enough for the staff? To make it effective?’

‘Yes,’ the Head Smith said simply. ‘What next?’

*Okay*, Jack looked over at Gwyn, and then looked down at the sword.

‘So I guess it’s your lucky day,’ Jack said to Gwyn, airily, forcing down his insecurities and flashing what he hoped was a winning smile. ‘Because it’s your turn, you know, as a thank you for bringing me here.’

Gwyn’s eyes widened in genuine shock. Jack swallowed, hoped he’d accept. He hadn’t known any other way he could possibly repay Gwyn. And he had learned through eavesdropping on the fae that they cared very much about squaring off favours, about leaving no debt unpaid. He also didn’t like the idea of Gwyn calling him on an unpaid debt, because he could just imagine a point – months in the future – when Gwyn asked for something stupid and war-related. Or, worse, came up to him and said, ‘In exchange for that mountain trek, how about you train with me?’

‘Six arrowheads,’ Gwyn said quickly, though he didn’t look away from Jack, as though he expected Jack to take back the offer.

Despite Gwyn’s confusion, it was obvious he’d thought about what he’d do if he could ever access

any of the metal. Jack smirked, and Gwyn looked down at the sword in something like wonder.

‘Arrowheads. Scrupulous. That takes almost nothing,’ the Head Smith said in approval, striking off another three inches of metal with his dark crayon. ‘Next?’

Jack could hardly believe it. He had expected his staff to need most of the sword, but instead, they still had more than half of the blade to work with. Jack suddenly appreciated how large the weapon was. This was turning out better than he ever hoped it would.

‘I want something for Pitch.’ Jack looked up at the Head Smith and frowned. ‘I just...don’t know what...I don’t know much about weapons.’

‘You’re asking for my input?’ the Head Smith said, and Jack nodded. ‘Well, it depends. If he favours swords, there’s enough remaining for a smallsword or several daggers. Maybe even a rapier.’

Jack’s heart beat faster. He had no idea what the right decision was. He didn’t think he even knew what a smallsword looked like. He had no idea what Pitch would want in place of his two-handed longsword.

Gwyn cleared his throat.

‘Respectfully, Head Smith, I’ve seen him train in the field and fight in battle. All his drills are designed for two-handed weapons. They’d be hard to adapt to a smallsword and are unsuited for the rapier. A fine suggestion you’ve made, but perhaps you both might consider a double-bladed axe. Though I can see there wouldn’t be enough metal in the sword for the size Pitch would likely wield, but I could fund another metal to be used to augment the design. Do you still have some of that strange, black meteor that fell? Albion never stops talking about how incredible that metal has been in his own axe.’

‘But axes aren’t- They’re nothing like a sword,’ Jack said in confusion.

‘The importance here is the function of the weapon,’ Gwyn said, and Jack felt relieved when he realised he wasn’t being condescended to. ‘A smallsword isn’t wielded like a large, two-handed weapon. And a rapier is a thrusting weapon. Augus uses a rapier, it’s a very different style of fighting. Very neat. Pitch preferred a weapon that cleaved and sliced, and – to be blunt – he liked something that did a *lot* of damage. A smallsword won’t do that. A double-bladed axe on the other hand...’

‘Like a flared Perrin’s axe?’ the Head Smith said, interest entering his voice.

‘Perhaps, as long as it was double-bladed and balanced well.’

‘And balanced *well*? Where do you think you are? Are you saying that we could *possibly* make a weapon that didn’t balance? You know we can take your sword back at *any* time.’ The Head Smith sounded truly affronted, and Gwyn apologised quickly.

Iskala walked to a wall of parchment, ink and quills, fetched some and returned, laying it down on the table next to the sword and its scabbard, next to Jack’s staff. She then walked away down a long, dark corridor and called out in that same, abrupt language. Two other smiths joined her quickly. One was at least seven feet tall, his hands and forearms were completely covered in soot. The Head Smith talked to them quickly in their language.

The Head Smith and the two other dwarves – Jack decided they also must be smiths – started sketching out designs immediately. They were quick and efficient, constantly comparing their work

and making adjustments.

Iskala wrapped her huge hand around Jack's forearm.

'We're collecting your blood now,' she said. 'Leave them to do their job. We have our own task. There is a bleeding room specifically for this purpose.'

Jack's eyes widened. *A bleeding room, crap.*

'May I come?' Gwyn said, and Iskala nodded. Jack made a face at him. *Maybe check with the one being bled first, Gwyn, thanks.*

Jack was led into a bright, circular room. There were basins of different sizes and shapes along stone shelving set back into the walls. Iskala pointed to a stool that she wanted Jack to sit on, and then took one of the smaller basins, and several wicked looking silvery instruments off the wall.

'Did you have to do this?' Jack said to Gwyn, who was examining the basins.

'Yes,' Gwyn said. He didn't turn around, he didn't explain further. Jack rolled his eyes at Gwyn's back, and then jerked when he felt hands pulling up the base of his sweatshirt again. Iskala said nothing, but he thought she gentled her motions after that.

Jack was surprised when she started scraping the frozen blood directly off his skin, flaking it into the basin.

'We don't have to bleed you,' Iskala said, as Jack breathed through the sensation of pressure on his bruises. 'When the weapon takes the blood for itself, we never need that much.'

'Lucky,' Gwyn said. 'They almost bled me dry.'

'By the oaths, I remember that,' Iskala said, laughing under her breath. 'At one point he hopped off the stool and shouted, 'You're just being *greedy* now!' Considering how much you wanted that sword, you were quite short with us.'

Gwyn looked embarrassed, and picked up a basin, turning it in his hands and refusing to acknowledge what she'd said. Jack wanted to laugh with Iskala, but couldn't summon much good feeling. He bowed his back helpfully. His fingers dug into his knees when she started lifting the section of sweatshirt that was frozen to his wound. She muttered something under her breath.

'Gwyn, will you hold this up and away from the wound while I get some salve?'

Gwyn put the basin back down quickly and walked over. Jack thought he was behaving like an awkward child being told to help with chores. As soon as he took hold of the sweatshirt, Iskala walked out of the room. Gwyn stared at the wound and silence stretched out between them. Jack wondered what Iskala was doing taking so long.

'Thank you,' Gwyn said, 'for the arrowheads.'

Jack looked down where his fingers were still digging into his knees. Even though his skin was no longer being scraped at, he was tense. It wasn't just that he was destroying Pitch's sword, it was also that he was altering his own staff. He didn't know how it would change, if it would be harder to channel his powers through it. He expected that *something* would change, he was starting to learn that nothing came without consequences.

'You know, you could've asked for more than that,' Jack said. 'I thought maybe you'd pick a knife

or something.'

'My favoured weapon is the bow,' Gwyn said, and Jack tilted his head sideways, ignored the twinge of pain that rocked his upper body. Gwyn looked down at Jack's wound, pensive.

'Really?'

Gwyn's eyes flicked over to Jack's.

'A knife may have been more practical, but sometimes I do not always wish to be so practical.' There was a sad quality to his voice. A moment later Gwyn's face cleared and he looked over at the basins instead.

Iskala returned and Gwyn stepped back, relinquishing his hold on the sweatshirt. She took over and started rubbing a greasy, thick salve onto Jack's back where she'd already scraped at the blood. Jack made a face at the smell. It certainly had animal fat in it. Still, minutes later, the pain started to recede, and Jack exhaled shakily. He hadn't realised how much pain he'd been repressing, until it started to fade away.

Iskala continued her work for almost an hour. Scraping at blood, adding the salve, working her way up Jack's back until she reached his shoulders. At that point, Jack simply took the hoodie off. He studied the bloodstains while she rubbed salve into the rest of his bruises. The stuff reeked, but it worked quickly.

'It will scar,' Iskala said, and Jack frowned.

'I don't really scar from things,' Jack said, though his thoughts drifted immediately to the scar at his neck. The scar that marked the exit of some of his soul, the scar that was maybe even the mark of his slow wasting.

'This? This will scar. Trust me.' She patted him on one of his bruised shoulders and then indicated that Jack should put his sweatshirt back on. After that, she tucked the basin under her arm and he and Gwyn followed her back out to the blue table where the sword and the staff rested.

The table was nearly covered in parchments scrawled with double-bladed battleaxes, and even more parchment littered the floor. The three smiths were laughing rowdily amongst each other, pointing to some of the designs and laughing harder. There was something about their raucous merriment that made Jack feel prickly in response. He itched to wipe the smiles off their faces, because what could possibly be so funny? At a time like this?

When the Head Smith saw Jack, he stabbed his finger down onto a piece of parchment laid above the others.

'Here we are. What do you think?' He turned to Gwyn. 'We're going to be needing that payment for the black meteor. Will you pay now, or later?'

'Later,' Gwyn said, and the Head Smith nodded.

Jack walked over to the table; his back and shoulders already felt more loose and relaxed thanks to Iskala's salve, and he was grateful for it.

Jack looked at the final design. It looked huge, and...brutal. It looked like a weapon the Nightmare King would use. It was something he would have called up out of the polluted sand, all that time ago. Jack furrowed his brow at it, and the smiths laughed again. One turned to Gwyn.

‘This will do a *lot* of damage! Just imagine it, he’s going to look like the Grim Reaper.’

‘A Grim Reaper who had his scythe replaced with *this* beauty,’ the Head Smith said, chuckling. Jack stared at them all, horrified, as they began laughing again. A deep, dark chill rose up from within him.

‘Do you think this is a game?’ Jack said quietly, angrily. He looked over at the sword and wanted to take it back, wanted to put it somewhere safe, where no one except Pitch would ever touch it again. Where giant dwarves with booming voices and soot-stained hands and faces wouldn’t laugh over it.

The dwarf that was seven feet tall frowned at Jack.

‘Aw, you’re no fun, are you?’

Jack’s eyes widened. He felt like the breath had been punched out of him. He placed a hand out on the table to brace himself, feeling dizzy.

*Aw, you’re no fun.*

Words that Jack had never heard in his *entire* life.

Someone was asking him if he was okay, and he nodded, because he *had* to be okay. He was fine. It was just *words*, he was fine. He blinked his head clear and looked down at the parchment. He tried to imagine Pitch with such a weapon and just couldn’t. But when he really thought about it, he couldn’t imagine Pitch using anything else but his sword. Jack felt like he was committing a treasonous act, in asking the Glasera to destroy it.

*But it has to be done.*

He looked directly at the Head Smith and nodded once, firm. The message was clear.

*Go ahead, make the stupid axe.*

‘Yes,’ the Head Smith said, now looking eager to commence the project, where before he had been arguing against it. ‘There will be a small amount of the metal left over. Very small. Not much to be made with it. But-’

‘Could you make a chain? A necklace? For this?’ Jack said on a burst of air, bringing out the locket from where it had been tucked safe and deep in his pants pocket. He placed it on top of the parchment and the Head Smith looked down at it.

‘For *that*?’ he said in disgust, taking in the condition of the locket itself.

‘I’m pretty sure that’s what I just said,’ Jack decided that he’d had enough of the Glasera dwarves to last him a lifetime.

‘Fine,’ the Head Smith said, dismissively. ‘Now both of you, go away. There’s a holding cave outside. Most people wait there for the weapons to be made. Big enough for a fire at least.’

Jack’s fingers crept over the table and he took the locket back. He wouldn’t leave it there, even if it meant the chain wouldn’t get made.

He gave the sword and his staff one last look as he walked away.

The fire had died down, the cave was small and warm. It was stocked with furs, food, aged earthenware jugs of grain alcohol. Gwyn stared into the coals, and Jack lay on his side, half-asleep. One side of his body more warm than the other. It reminded him of Pitch, of being allowed to sleep next to someone, of a person who didn't complain about how cold he was.

Jack sat up in frustration as his thoughts ran away from him.

'I thought that went well, all things considering,' Gwyn said.

'Did you see that axe though? Did I make the right decision?'

'It's too late now,' Gwyn said and Jack glared at him.

'*Not* helpful.'

Gwyn didn't say anything. He poked his fingers through a small bag of barley sugar he'd found, and lifted one of the golden sweets to his lips. Then he offered the bag to Jack.

'No, I don't really eat,' Jack said, and Gwyn looked at him, perplexed. 'Well, I don't really need to, do I?' Jack said, defensively.

'Didn't you ever consider that eating might help with your energy levels?'

Gwyn pushed the bag over to Jack, who took one of the sweets cautiously and rolled the hard, golden sugar in his fingers.

'No, I didn't consider that,' Jack said. 'I don't understand. I don't *need* to eat.'

'At full energy, we don't need to sleep either, but it can still refresh us. I'm surprised none of the Guardians have spoken with you about this. Truly. Sometimes...'

Gwyn looked back into the coals and Jack put the boiled sweet in his mouth and then crunched down on it. He couldn't melt the sugar, as Gwyn did, his mouth was too cold. The sugar shattered and splintered on his tongue, and the rounded flavour felt soothing, somehow. Jack reached for another barley sugar.

'Sometimes what?' Jack prompted.

'Sometimes you behave a lot like a very new fae. Yet sometimes you show your experience. At the Wild Hunt, one could have believed that you had been on this earth for thousands of years, wild and capable. Now, you don't even know that food is not something we eat because we need it, but something we eat because we can? Because it enriches us. The delight of eating can be a nourishing act, far beyond digestion.'

Jack stretched his legs out and shook his head slowly. There was so much he didn't know. For the longest time, he only wanted to know why no one believed in him. That was the only thing that had mattered. But as time passed, as he came to know more of the spirits who inhabited the world, he realised there were huge gaps in his education. It made him uncomfortable, to know how naive he could be. He knew the other Guardians liked eating, especially North, but he'd never thought that meant that he might benefit from eating food.

'Is that why you don't have a home yet?' Gwyn said, and Jack looked at him, in confusion.

'I know you have a home based in the mundane world,' Gwyn continued. 'But you don't have a home in the otherworlds, like the Guardians, like the rest of the fae, do you? I'd always just

assumed it was because you didn't need one, but do you know how to make one?'

Jack stared at him.

Gwyn shifted uncomfortably.

'Most fae learn how to do it organically. They can feel out the difference between the otherworld and the mundane one, and then slip into the otherworld to make their home. Whatever it may be. It is a space where humans can never bother them. Even hearth wights who spend so much of their time in human homes, have an otherworldly home too. You've never felt the urge to create a home in the otherworld, like North and Toothiana did?'

Jack swallowed.

'What do you mean there's a difference between the otherworld and the mundane one?' Jack said, 'I mean, I know that things like this mountain aren't visible to human eyes and sort of exist...elsewhere. But it doesn't *feel* any different to the real world. I only know that it's not visible to human eyes because, hey, it's a magic mountain and no one in the real world is talking about it on the news or anything.'

Gwyn shook his head in slow disbelief, staring down at the floor between them.

'I'm not the person to be teaching you these things,' he said, and Jack was surprised to hear how shaky he sounded. 'This goes beyond you not enjoying formal education. There are things you have to know. I could...assist. If someone else isn't forthcoming.'

'I'm not fae, though,' Jack said and Gwyn looked at Jack incredulously.

'I *know* that. But you're closer than any of the others. You might as well be. The Wild Hunt proved it. You have a wild, natural magic. And with all due respect, it appears you do not even know a great deal about your fellow Guardians either. Did you think Toothiana's palace just appeared? Did you never wonder why you didn't have something for yourself? Something that...reflected yourself?'

Jack drew his legs up to his body and wrapped an arm around them. He *had* thought about it. He'd thought about it back when he'd made that terrible shack and hadn't understood why the Guardians had their grandiose, amazing homes, and he couldn't copy them. He had just assumed the flaw was with him.

Gwyn dropped the subject, and Jack was in no hurry to pick it up again. It turned out that having the King of the Seelie fae realise you were some ignorant, uneducated being did not feel great.

Jack thought back to the events with the Glasera and then closed his eyes. He remembered how uncomfortable their laughter had made him.

'I don't think my centre is fun, anymore,' Jack said, on a half-smile.

'I am certain it isn't,' Gwyn said firmly.

Jack lifted his head off his knees and stared at Gwyn.

'I was sort of joking,' Jack said, and Gwyn groaned in frustration.

'Tell me you know that centres can change.'

'I...' Jack's heart started pounding. Fear curled through him. His centre had *changed*? North had never said anything about centres being capable of *changing*. And Gwyn believed in them? He'd always just assumed that the concept of centres belonged to the Guardians. North was the only one who ever went on about it.

'I thought the idea of centres was like...a Guardian thing,' Jack said, and Gwyn snorted. 'But even Pitch doesn't believe in them, he told me they're a Guardian thing.'

'With all due respect to Pitch, he's not from around here. And they are most certainly *not* just a Guardian thing.'

'So you have a centre?' Jack said, curious.

'All the fae do,' Gwyn said. 'Mine's changed twice, in my lifetime. They don't change often. Most never change. Mine started out as triumph,' Gwyn looked up at the cave ceiling. 'What a core energy that was. People I favoured found their paths filled with luck and fortune. I entered into any game or battle and could never lose. My enemies fell before me, around me, sometimes without even needing to lift a finger.'

'But triumph...requires that there must always be winners and losers. And it requires a conquering nature. And those of us with conquering natures are sometimes capable of very dark acts. I did something, forced someone to do something, and I regretted it afterwards. Not immediately, no. At the time I was so caught up in my sense of triumph and the bloodlust that fuelled it. But later, I thought about it, I thought about what I had done, and the blood that was left on my hands because of it, and I retreated to the wild.'

'And that was the first time my centre changed. It was a difficult time. A necessary time.'

Jack stared at Gwyn. It was the most he'd ever heard Gwyn say at once. He hadn't even known that Gwyn could string so many sentences together and turn them into conversation.

'What'd it change into?' Jack said, and Gwyn lay on his back. He focused on the small vent where the grey-silver smoke coiled, winding its way out of the cave.

'Wildness. That was around the time I became the leader of the Wild Hunt. And the Wild Hunt isn't about winning or losing. It's not about conquering. You've met the King of the Forest. Can he be conquered? Not *truly*. And sometimes he escapes, or he doesn't allow himself to be caught. And so, that was a strange time. I lived with forest animals, I ran through the woods with mud on my face and dirt on my hands and...I miss it.'

Jack found it surprisingly easy to imagine. For all that Gwyn's appearance indicated some level of aristocracy, with his angular features; there was a feral quality about him.

'And then your centre changed again?' Jack prompted, and Gwyn nodded.

'It became justice. That was before they declared me King, but it's almost certainly part of the reason why they declared me King. That and perhaps some of the fae still hope I will access my old centre of triumph. You can't embody something for so long and have the essence of it truly disappear. But a central energy can be ousted from its central place, it can evolve. It can make it hard to know where your life may take you, it makes it harder to see into your future. Apparently having a changeable centre can make one's fate hard to read, which is why Ondine can't see too far into my future.'

Jack felt like a piece of the puzzle had just slotted into place. Had his centre started changing



before Pitch had been possessed by the shadows again? Was that why Ondine couldn't read his future properly?

'What...do you think my centre is now?' Jack said, and Gwyn gazed at him, contemplative.

'Focus, perhaps? Determination? You're certainly resolved to-'

They stared at each other.

'*Resolve*,' they said together.

As soon as it was uttered aloud, Jack felt a responding echo in the core of him. Where, once, he had been able to draw upon wild excitement, fun and laughter, something tempered and implacable rested instead. It was the resolve that he drew upon to stay focused, to make sure he didn't lose sight of his goals. The resolve that allowed him to scale a mountain and ask that Pitch's sword be destroyed and risk his staff.

'You need to be careful with a centre like that, Jack,' Gwyn said, sombre. 'Resolve is like triumph. It has a 'take no prisoners' quality about it. If you privilege your resolve above all else, you may lose sight of the things that matter to you. I lost sight of my mercy when my centre was triumph. I became a very hard person.'

Jack looked away. He wanted to become a hard person. He would have all the time in the world to thaw out again, once he'd saved Pitch, but until then he couldn't afford his softness. He had a sense of the pain inside of him, of how it would ruin him if he allowed himself to experience it. He was too familiar with loss and grief already. He couldn't afford despair either, so it roiled deep inside of him, a choppy, black ocean.

'What's Gulvi's centre?' Jack said, changing the subject.

Gwyn, for once, decided to play along.

'Chaos. And likely to remain that way.'

'What about Augus?'

'Domination,' Gwyn said easily. 'His brother, Ash – the Glashtyn – is self-indulgence. Though he describes it as a mix between carousing and tomfoolery. Which he would.'

'The Nain Rouge?' Jack said, facing Gwyn properly, eager to learn more.

'Voracity, and before that, horror,' Gwyn said. 'Who else have you met? Albion's centre is stability, for all that he is a patriarch of a temperamental ocean. Ondine's centre is friendship, which makes her one of the most adored fae in the Seelie Court. Hers has changed more times than my own, over the centuries. She cannot have her future divined at all. Unusually changeable centres are not uncommon for wights that control the waters. Jenny Greenteeth's centre is the idea of home. Dullahan's is privacy. It's not a coincidence you haven't met him yet. You may not meet him at all.'

'He was the one who killed all those fae, at the school, right? Who caused that high casualty count?'

'He killed so many fae because they saw him. He only left the children alone, because they couldn't.'

‘What about Pitch?’ Jack said, and Gwyn shook his head.

‘It was changing the entire time that we were training together. Every time I thought I had a sense of it, I’d realise I was wrong. I thought, maybe, I knew what it was at the end. But as I’m not sure, I’m not comfortable saying.’

Jack stood up and stretched gingerly, grateful for the salve, grateful for a chance to sleep now that they’d reached the mountain summit. He walked away from the warmth of the fire over to a cooler, sheltered section of cave. Jack lay down on the bare ground and shifted until he was comfortable, tucking a hand under his head.

Gwyn watched Jack thoughtfully. Jack thought he could see it now. Glimpses of wildness, of triumph, of justice.

‘Train with us,’ Gwyn said, suddenly.

‘Not this *again*,’ Jack groaned, throwing his other arm over his face. ‘You are *obsessed*.’

‘I want to learn how to make those snowstorms with you. And it’s important. We’ll need a coordinated strike against someone like the Nightmare King. We certainly need more ideas, and training is one of the places where ideas can be tested for their merits. And your centre is- I think you might be capable now. You might never enjoy it, but please consider it.’

Jack reluctantly realised if he was going to leave no stone unturned, if he was going to consider every option, he *had* to.

‘I don’t want to,’ Jack said into his arm, more complaint than refusal.

He thought Gwyn would reply, would try and convince him, but Jack only heard the sounds of Gwyn settling down for the evening. Usually he stayed awake and watchful, but he’d been markedly more relaxed since they’d dropped the sword off with the Glasera. Jack thought he was actually going to sleep for the first time since they’d started walking up the mountain.

Jack missed the days when sleep was a choice; not a necessity.

\*

He was in the gymnasium.

Fear hammered and hammered, threaded through him, sent terror into his heart like a thick, cold clot. He looked down and the shadow was there, pushing into him. He screamed so loudly that his throat tore. It felt revolting, and he couldn’t make it *stop*. All the losses he’d experienced, even the Nain Rouge sucking out part of his soul from him, through his throat – nothing was like that hungry mass pushing up through the arch of his foot, seeking and stealing at the same time. It entered with the promise of more.

And as Jack realised that there was *more*, he looked up.

A wall of shadows.

Jack screamed again and again when the shadow suddenly pushed further than it ever had. The wall of shadows quivered with excitement, rose up and fell down upon him. There was no golden light, no Pitch.

Hysteria shattered his mind. He struggled. He created frost lightning with his bare hands, and none

of it made any difference. He would have turned himself inside out, if he thought it might work. He split the core of himself, searched for his well of power. He would burn himself out before he'd let the darkness take him. He would empty out his own soul.

His power flashed into a circular, pale blue ball. He had never felt something so strong come from his own body, it eviscerated his energy, but he felt a moment of victory. Because nothing could survive that. Nothing could...

When Jack realised the shadows were still there, still invading, Jack heard himself shriek in disbelief. He was never going to escape. A noise that had never been human tore its way out of his throat. There would be no escape. He wouldn't ever-

He woke gasping and clawing at the body next to him, tears streaming down his face. He whimpered over and over again, took too long to take stock of his surroundings.

He was on a bed. He was in Kostroma. He was on Pitch's bed, warm sheets beneath him, a warm body alongside his.

Jack sobbed once.

Pre-dawn light pushed in gently through the windows. He felt a chill in the air, knew that snow had recently fallen. Little details anchored him, brought him back to himself.

'Shhh,' a voice, too familiar. Jack shuddered so hard he thought he'd actually come apart. A warm, strong arm curved around him, pulled him close. Pitch's body moved until he was over Jack, braced on one arm, the other curled protectively over his chest. Jack felt Pitch looking down at him, but couldn't look up. It hurt too much. '*Hush* now, little one. Did you have a bad dream?'

'*Pitch*,' Jack said, his voice breaking. Something horrible was happening to his heart. He didn't have room for the love that swelled inside of him. Not while he could still feel the ghosts of shadows, how they'd felt beneath his skin, how desperate he'd been to be rid of them.

'All that *fear*,' Pitch said, the reassurance sounding off-key. Jack hardly noticed, pressed his face into Pitch's arm, and squeezed his eyes shut when Pitch laughed at him. 'Dear me, whatever is the matter?'

'I did have a bad dream,' Jack said, his voice tiny, small.

'Did you?' Pitch said, and Jack just wanted to curl into him, wanted to be held until he stopped shivering, until the mess of his mind was contained again. It was taking all of his energy to not burst into sobs like some abandoned child. 'And how do you find it's going now?'

'Wh-what?' Jack said, confused.

'Tsk ts, so slow on the uptake. Ah, well, you've always been a little like that, haven't you? *Dense*.'

Jack blinked into Pitch's arm, looked at the tears smeared over his darker skin. Horror made him feel queasy.

Pitch laughed again. There was nothing warm in the sound.

*No*, Jack realised.

Jack struck hard against the warm arm holding him down on the bed, he kicked up violently. He

managed to free himself enough to roll off the side of the bed. Something cracked in the middle of himself. The Nightmare King was using Pitch's body, using his face, his robe; he'd made himself appear diminished and smaller, he'd smoothed away the worst of the dark shadows, he'd even made the embroidery return. Jack stared at him and wished he could pull Pitch back into existence with his bare hands. But he could barely stand, he was shaking so hard from the nightmare.

The nightmare that was still going.

'You've been a tough one to track down,' the Nightmare King said, sliding off the bed and taking two smooth steps towards Jack, only to stop and look deeply amused when Jack stepped backwards all the way into the wall. 'One would almost think you've been *hiding* from me. So don't be like that, lover. Maybe we could pretend, for old time's sake. I could pretend to be oh, so, *alone*, and so hard up on my luck, that I would be desperate enough to offer *you* a place by my side.'

He laughed coolly. The Nightmare King's hands illustrated everything he said with dramatic eloquence. There was nothing but cruelty in his eyes. It wasn't even the same Nightmare King who had confronted him in Antarctica. Something of Pitch *had* come through on that day, Jack was sure of it.

He saw nothing of Pitch now. Just shadows. Shadows taking something that didn't belong to them.

'It's easy now,' Jack rasped. 'It's easy to see the difference between you and him. And sure, I was confused, I mistook you for all of like a *minute*. But now look at you. I'm not scared of *you*.'

'Oh, no, I know,' the Nightmare King purred. 'Shall I explore then? Do you want to know what you're *truly* scared of?'

Jack froze.

*Kind of walked straight into that one.*

The Nightmare King tilted his head back. His eyes were half-closed and his mouth open as though tasting something. Jack couldn't feel it, as the Nightmare King rifled through his fears.

'Oh, Jack, this is almost too easy. And you think of yourself as some kind of *threat* to me? You're terrified of something that's already happened, aren't you? Poor, poor, Jack. Couldn't imagine a world without his dear Pitch Black in it and so he *doesn't*. What a horror. So desperate to be loved he fell for the first creature that offered him shallow attention and a measure of absent care. Do you know what I see when I look at you, Jack Frost? I see someone who has not yet come to terms with what he's lost for good. A young, pathetic creature, trying to hold the pieces of himself together with masking tape.'

Jack trembled. He focused on hardening ice, on strong walls of it, on making sure that he did not show signs of how much the words got to him. Hearing the Nightmare King talk to him in that *voice*, Jack could almost imagine that it was Pitch pushing at him again, Pitch trying to get him to reveal the truth so that he could gently correct him, debunk his insecurities and reward him with reassurance.

This was not Pitch.

'What are you doing here? If I'm so *small* and *pathetic*, why amuse yourself with me?' Jack said, stepping away from the wall. 'You know what I see when I look at you? I see a temporary problem. One that I'm gonna fix. And that's *all* you are.'

The smile on the Nightmare King's face disappeared. Jack took another step forward.

‘You know what else I see? Among other things? A mess of about a hundred different soldiers who weren’t *brave* enough to last out one initiation where their soul was hurt. You poor, poor soldiers. All of you. Reduced to Nightmare Men because you couldn’t pull your shit together. Not even able to withstand the pain of part of your soul missing. Even I could do that. Tell me how small and pathetic I look *now*.’

Jack’s fingers flexed around his staff, he hadn’t realised it was there. Maybe it hadn’t been. It was a dream, after all.

‘Are you so obsessed with Kozmotis,’ Jack continued, ‘that you have to cling to him in any form you can? Is that it? So *desperate*? You know, a long time ago, Pitch used to talk to me about how I projected my shit onto him. And do you know, all I hear when you talk shit about me, is a bunch of scared soldiers who lost everything, and turned to the darkness instead. A mass of shadows who project their shit onto other people. And sure, I know there’s more to it than that. But I know some of you in there are hearing me. Aren’t you?’

The Nightmare King stood as still as stone, staring down at Jack, calculating.

‘Do you think I’m a *temporary* problem?’ the Nightmare King whispered, finally. ‘But don’t you know, Jack? *I’m not going anywhere*.’

Jack cried out. He felt like he’d been punched in the gut, his whole body jolted around the phrase. He bent double and used his staff to hold him upright. He gasped around the hugeness of hearing those words again.

Suddenly the Nightmare King was beside him, having melted through shadows to be right there, lips against his ear, an unforgiving hand digging hard into the back of his neck.

‘How many times do you want to hear it? Because I can say it over and over again. I’m. Not. Going. *Anywhere*.’

Jack whimpered, jerked hard, but the fingers wouldn’t let him go. Clawed fingernails pierced his skin, dug deep into the muscles in the back of his neck. Pain flared, but he hardly noticed it, caught in the awfulness of hearing the Nightmare King use those words against him.

‘You don’t have the *right!*’ Jack said, torn between outrage and a pain that turned his insides to flame.

The Nightmare King chuckled.

‘You think you can defeat *me*?’ he whispered, ‘You haven’t even *met* me. You don’t know what I was, when I was at my strongest. You met a mere *shade* of me, when you were with those miscreants that call themselves *Guardians*. Do you know what I did to the Tsars and Tsarinas? Can you *imagine* how I laid waste to planets, oh, if you could have *been* there. It was *glorious!* The stars sung my name and it was a terrible noise that struck terror into the hearts of *all!*’

The Nightmare King slammed the heel of his palm into Jack’s chest. He bounced back against the wall hard, pain exploded through his head and sternum.

‘You think it’s just a hundred soldiers in here? We are a *legion*. And Fearlings. And the living darkness. You have only one who can make the golden light, and he makes it *poorly*. You have no other weapons against us, and we *know* it. Your power is nothing more than frozen water, and you are so, so *weak*. I can smell it on you. The sickness. The wasting of you.’

The Nightmare King stepped back, satisfaction on his face, golden eyes feverish with power.

Jack gathered his breath back to himself, outraged.

‘Okay,’ Jack said, thinking, *To hell with it*, ‘so you’re not a hundred broken soldiers. Got it. You’re a *legion* of cowards then. That’s great. You know the one thing I’ve learned about cowards over the years? They’re really good at talking a big game. But wow, come on, how many planets have you destroyed since you *crash-landed* here? Was it a whole...wait now...let me count on my fingers, because I don’t want to get it wrong. I think it was like, a whole *zero*. I mean,’ Jack let himself laugh, and he stood straighter. ‘Come on already. I guess a legion of cowards talk a *really* big game.’

‘You-’

‘No, seriously, you want to have this show down with me? Come in person. Except you *can’t*, because you’re not allowed on the mountain in the flesh, are you? If you’re so *powerful*, how come you haven’t been able to break into the Seelie Court yet? How come you’re not actually here? You didn’t know what you were getting yourself into, when you landed on this planet. You-’

‘*That’s it*,’ the Nightmare King said suddenly, though not in retaliation, but in realisation. He grinned, revealing jagged teeth. ‘You really aren’t afraid of me, are you? That’s admirable. Really, that is some *quality* showmanship, right there. But be careful, Jack. You’re playing with the grown-ups now. You wouldn’t want me to turn you into the thing that you *hate*.’

Jack felt something shift underneath his foot and looked down quickly. A shadow swirled there, and then a tendril came up and wrapped almost lovingly around his ankle.

*No. No, no, no.*

The Nightmare King laughed, and Jack shook when he felt the shadow push against the base of his foot. Not *in*, not yet, but pushing like it wanted to. Like it *could*.

‘How does it feel, Jack? This legion of cowards getting the better of you?’

‘Stop it,’ Jack said, nausea rocketing through him. He retched when the shadow pushed at him again. ‘Stop this.’

‘Would you like to know how quickly we’d take over your mind? How quickly you’d lose all sense of yourself? It’s like dying. Except it’s very, *very* painful. And I would take it *slow*, just for you.’

Jack shrieked when the shadow pushed past the barrier of his skin. He stared up wildly at the Nightmare King.

‘You never truly get the peace of death, though,’ the Nightmare King continued. ‘Wouldn’t that be nice? But I don’t do *nice*. We would *pollute* you, wriggle like maggots and worms through your broken soul, turn it into food. And sometimes, for fun perhaps, we’d let you up through the darkness so you could glimpse the horrible, heinous acts you were committing, so you could *know* how completely and utterly taken over you’d been. How much you belonged to us.’

Jack opened his mouth on a scream as the shadow slipped further into him. Then suddenly he realised what the Nightmare King was saying.

*Pitch. Pitch was going through all of that. Right now. Polluted and taken over and there was no one else who would find a way to get him out of that, and right now, oh god, he’s going through that right now.*

Jack's palms came together unconsciously. He hardly needed to search within to find the well of power available. This was a dream, he had his staff, even though he knew very well it was in the summit with the Glasera dwarves. Maybe he had more power, too. Maybe the Nightmare King wasn't the only one who could master a dream-state.

Jack's eyes closed, he saw *his* Pitch in his mind's eye, and after that, it was almost easy.

The power flew out of him, shattered the house, turned the Nightmare King into fragments of shadow. Whatever had been pushing up into his foot dissolved. Frost lightning shot in all directions, obliterating everything. Jack felt himself disappear into the ether.

He woke with a sudden shock of awareness, breath strangling in his throat. He pushed himself upright and stared wildly around the cave, peering at all the shadows closely. He couldn't sense any living shadows at all.

Jack started in fear when Gwyn gasped himself awake. Gwyn gave a short, sharp cry of horror and had pushed himself to his knees and drawn his sword before he had fully roused.

Gwyn realised where they were, and he – too – stared around at the shadows for a few seconds, before his eyes met Jack's.

'Nightmare?' Jack said, breathless.

'Yes. You?'

'Yep.'

'Do you...want to talk about it?' Gwyn said. They looked at each other with knowing. The Nightmare King had been in both of their dreams. Gwyn looked wan, like he was going to be ill. Jack wondered what he'd seen.

'Nope. You?'

'Not particularly.'

Jack became aware that he was shaking, he looked at his hands, fisted them, and even that didn't work. He pushed himself up so that he was kneeling and then wrapped arms around himself, staring down at the ground.

He felt blank, as though his organs had been removed. He could almost hear the sound of wind rattling through his body.

Gwyn gasped loudly, and Jack was momentarily afraid that the Nightmare King was in the cave with them. But instead Gwyn had bent over himself, one hand clutching at his ribs, the other bracing himself on the floor. Jack was shocked to see him so vulnerable. If it wasn't for the fact that it was happening in front of him, he wouldn't have thought it was possible. Gwyn's body language was that of a shattered man, and Jack wondered what expression his tangle of pale, platinum hair hid.

Jack pushed himself upright, walked over hesitantly. Gwyn didn't move, didn't even acknowledge him.

He crouched beside him, uncertain.

'He did a number on you, huh?' Jack said, trying to make his voice quiet. He'd never had to

comfort someone after a nightmare before.

'I'm sorry,' Gwyn said heavily, and Jack's brow furrowed.

'Why?'

'You shouldn't see me like this.' Gwyn forced himself back until he was kneeling. His expression was haunted. He stared into the distance. Jack wondered if that was how he looked himself. Scoured out and trying to remember how to focus again.

'Are you serious?' Jack said. 'Besides, it kind of makes you more likeable. I mean, not that I *like* seeing you like this...'

Jack looked at the glowing coals awkwardly. Now that he'd come over, he didn't know what to do. They clearly weren't safe on the mountain any longer. Jack wondered if the enchantments that had kept them protected and bound to the mountain had disappeared now that the Glasera had agreed to work with them.

Jack swallowed hard when a swoop of nausea left him dazed. The Nightmare King, attacking people directly, not just sending the Nightmares out to do his bidding. Strong enough to attack multiple people at once, *from a distance*. Jack remembered the shadow moving through his skin and made a small sound.

'Gwyn?' Jack said, quietly.

'Yes?' Jack looked up. Gwyn was closer. At some point, while Jack had been remembering the shadows and holding back the worst of his nausea, Gwyn had come over and settled next to him. Jack was grateful for his sturdy, silent presence. He was warm. Jack could feel his body heat. It wasn't like Pitch's; that constant, implacable *heat*. But he was warm.

'Do you think I'm still in danger of...being possessed by the shadows?'

Gwyn didn't say anything for a long time. Jack wondered if he wasn't replying because he thought the answer was too obvious to say out loud. He wondered if it was just going to be one of those strange moments when Gwyn didn't answer a direction question; he'd done that a lot while they'd scaled the mountain. Jack would ask him something, and Gwyn just wouldn't reply.

'That bastard,' Gwyn said, venom making his voice hard. Jack looked at Gwyn in shock, but Gwyn was looking out of the cave, into the mess of a blizzard outside. It made Jack feel strangely comforted, to hear Gwyn say that.

'But am I? Still at risk? I hadn't thought about it. Which is stupid. I should-'

'Pitch has told me about the Nightmare King, Jack. I know a little of his life. The impression I get is that the Nightmare King doesn't play by other's rules, and keeps the shadows to himself. I also think it's one of tactical reasons Pitch decided that it had to be him. Aside from targeting children, who are vulnerable, I don't believe that the Nightmare King targeted anyone else for possession. If it was so easy to possess anyone with a rip in their soul, the Nightmare King could have made armies, thousands of years ago.

'But he hasn't. And reports are that he isn't doing that now. So, maybe you're at risk. Of course, anything is possible. But I think, in this case, the Nightmare King is likely to want the shadows for himself. Personally, I think Augus is playing with fire. I think he was doing so when he invited the Nain Rouge to his Court, and he's doing it again now.'



Jack didn't feel reassured.

'Sometimes you talk about August like...you care about him,' Jack said. Changing the subject.

Gwyn sighed. He didn't reply. He looked over at Jack, and offered something of a rueful smile, as though he didn't know how to even answer. And Jack – blaming it on fatigue, on weakness – felt Gwyn's eye contact at this close proximity as though a small star was sparking inside his body. He felt the full impact of Gwyn's light, a shimmering warmth, not unlike teleporting with him. It sunk into his pores, made his vision blur. It made him feel good. Like he was basking in winter sunlight.

'I thought your centre was light,' Jack said, stupidly.

Gwyn smiled widely, flattered.

'Why would you think that?'

'Pitch says you're made of it.'

'Yes,' Gwyn said, 'and you are a winter spirit, but your centre isn't winter or frost or ice, is it?'

The warmth, the light of him, Jack felt hypnotised, swayed. He had a brief moment to wonder why Gwyn's glamour was affecting him so *much*, before his worry evaporated. He felt amazing. It was addictive. Jack leaned closer, unthinking, woven into a spell.

He was warm like Pitch had been warm. He radiated light like Pitch could. He was stoic and reserved and preferred two-handed weapons and Jack leaned closer, wanting to *forget*, wanting to erase everything, wanting Gwyn's light to turn his world to rights. This close, he felt like it could.

Gwyn was saying something, his eyes widened. Jack thought he caught the word 'dra'ocht,' but he couldn't be sure, and he didn't care.

There was no logical thought left when he leaned up and pressed his closed lips to Gwyn's. They were lukewarm. They stayed closed.

And then his eyes opened, and Gwyn was staring at him, and Jack reeled.

*Not Pitch's eyes, not Pitch's light, not Pitch.*

He reared backwards with a cry, staggering into a standing position, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. With every step he took in retreat, the thread of glamour between them stretched until it broke, leaving Jack aware of what he'd just done.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said, 'I'm sorry, I don't know what ha- I don't know what came over me. I'm sorry. I'm not even- Oh my god.' Jack hid his face with his hand and turned away from Gwyn, embarrassed, humiliated. *What the hell is wrong with me? What have I done? You idiot, you spend a month away from Pitch and suddenly you turn into some-*

'Wait, wait,' Gwyn was standing, holding his hands out placatingly, and Jack realised he was still taking steps backwards, heading closer and closer to the cave entrance. Gwyn looked panicked. 'It was the dra'ocht. I assure you. Proximity and stress, I had completely forgotten you were so affected by it.'

Jack desperately wanted to hang all of his fears on that statement, because it was an out, it was so tempting. But he knew it wasn't that simple. Beneath the guilt, the horror, he owed Gwyn an explanation.

‘No, it’s...I’m *sorry*. You remind me of him. It’s so *stupid*. I’m meant to be staying focused and instead I pull this and I know you think I’m just this, this stupid- I mean, I wouldn’t even *blame* you.’

Jack had to force himself to stop talking, tried to calm his ragged breathing and failed. He couldn’t stay in the cave anymore.

He walked into the blizzard and started hyperventilating. Wind whistled around him. It plucked at him as it always did, asked him to join it, but Jack was too busy trying to stamp down the sudden explosion of pressure in his mind; the fears, the worries, one after the other. And beneath it all, he sensed a well of pain that was too deep and too wide. He clenched his eyes shut, tightened his fists, his jaw. He forced everything down, all the fears, one by one, until he was left with nothing but a pervasive sense of guilt, an anger at himself that Jack decided was appropriate, given the circumstances.

He stood there for a long time, imagining himself turning to permafrost and the kind of ice that didn’t melt for thousands of years.

Jack wandered back towards the entrance of the cave after an hour or so had passed. He was shocked to see the fire blazing again. Gwyn was sitting by it, gazing into the flames. His mouth was caught in a frown, his eyelids low. He looked caught between tiredness and melancholy.

Jack sat down as close to Gwyn as he dared, which left a gap of about fifteen feet between them.

‘I understand something of needing to find comfort or succour during dark times, Jack,’ Gwyn said, without looking up. ‘And believe me when I say that Pitch will understand.’

‘You don’t have to make me feel better about it.’

‘No I don’t,’ Gwyn said. ‘Two questions though. Do you feel like doing it now? Did you feel like kissing me at any other point on the mountain? Even if I *do* remind you of Pitch?’

Jack swallowed. He shook his head. He realised that he really hadn’t felt like making any overtures towards Gwyn at all, and now that he was a safe distance away, he still didn’t. Gwyn reminded him of Pitch, but that was all. Like this, Jack was surprised he’d even kissed him. Gwyn made a sound of frustration in his throat.

‘I was a fool. I should have *remembered*.’

‘Well, you’ve had a bad night too,’ Jack said, shrugging.

Jack stared at the corner where he’d been sleeping, before he’d woken himself up from the Nightmare King’s dream.

‘I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think I should train with you, maybe.’

Gwyn shifted, it was an eager sound, a sudden scrape against the stone floor. Jack didn’t look at him, carefully avoiding too much eye contact. He was scared of it happening again. Scared of being hypnotised by that light. He felt betrayed by how good he’d felt, knowing that all of it was artificial.

Jack lay back when Gwyn didn’t reply. He realised there was nothing Gwyn could say that would make him okay with the idea of training, and maybe Gwyn knew it too.

Why had the Nightmare King left them alone for so long? Why had he broken through the

enchantments of the mountain now?

'The sword!' Jack said sharply, sitting up again. 'That's why! I can't believe I didn't think of it until now.'

Gwyn's eyes narrowed.

'He couldn't come near us while I had the sword on me. It's got nothing to do with the mountain. Do you think that's why? He couldn't even *hold* it, at the gymnasium. And now we don't have it anymore. He thought I was *hiding* from him; but maybe it's just because I was wearing the sword all the time!'

'If that's truly the case, then your staff...'

'It might give me some protection against the nightmares right? And you? With the arrowheads? If you kept them on you?'

Gwyn nodded speculatively.

'Might give us an advantage,' he said, and Jack hoped so. He didn't know how many more nightmares like that he could handle. He felt like the Nightmare King wouldn't stay away for long.

Jack thought about everything the Nightmare King had said; about his weakness, about the sickness of him, about how painful it was to be possessed, how it felt like dying. About how powerless they all were, only having one person who could make the light, and only make it badly.

Jack frowned.

*If only we could find a way to make it stronger.*

People could start fires with lenses of clear ice, could focus the sun's glare into a point until the light was so focused that it would spark tinder. Maybe they could find a way to focus Gwyn's light. After all, the snowstorms diffused it; made it weaker but spread it over a greater distance. And though it did damage to the Nightmares, it only irritated the living the shadows, and it was almost nothing to the Nightmare Men. But if they could get a single beam of focused golden light...

'Hey, Gwyn?' Jack said, softly.

'Yes?'

'I have an idea. But we're gonna need North.'

'North?' Gwyn said in some confusion.

'Yeah, North. He can make *anything*.'

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Allies and Enemies,' Jack and Gwyn start training together, which has mixed results. Jack approaches North with an idea. And he discovers that a certain King of the Unseelie Fae *really* has it out for him.



# Allies and Enemies

## Chapter Notes

First things first, I would like to point out that there is this amazing illustration of [Gulvi \(which looks exactly how I imagined her\), by Djinngin](#). And also, [SisyphusRising](#) created an *original piano composition* called [Frost Ballad](#) for the *Shadows & Light* series. I am actually forgetting some of the awesomeness that has been happening, so also consider checking out the [fanart tag](#) I've started over at my own Tumblr. Okay, that's it for the most epic, awesome housekeeping ever.

\*

Thank you for all the kudos, the subscribes and bookmarks, and omg the comments. Seriously. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His staff was beautiful.

It had always had a rugged, natural beauty. But now – even without his frost clinging to the wood – it *shone*.

Jack stared at it, hardly dared to believe it was his. It was as though they had broken the metal from Pitch's sword down to its smallest components and then sprayed them onto the wood itself. The ridges and whorls of wood-grain were still visible, but over them, in fine particles, glittered a silvery sheen.

'Go on. Take it,' the Head Smith said, a glow of pride in his eyes.

Jack drew a breath, took it from the Head Smith's hands. It seemed like hardly any metal at all had been used for the entire staff and yet it glowed in the firelight. Jack exhaled hard as his frost started to creep up and down the staff as naturally as it always had. He lifted it thoughtfully. It didn't feel much heavier, though he could tell there was a slight increase in weight; nothing like what he expected.

'Will the ice affect it?' Jack said, staring at the coils of frost moving over the silvery particles of metal. It didn't seem possible, the ice seemed to make the metal even more impressive.

'You wanted to preserve the staff's power, and so we did. We're Glasera. We don't make mistakes. We *can't*,' the Head Smith said.

Jack swung the staff through the air and a cool wind answered, whipped around everyone. He grasped it in both hands, brought it down and snow answered. After so long not holding his staff, he felt closer to it than before. He didn't care if it was wrong to be so sentimentally attached to an object, it was like an extra limb. He gazed at in awe as the ice followed its call.

'Now the arrowheads for you,' the Head Smith said, and Gwyn stepped forward, his body thrumming with the kind of nervous excitement that many children had at Christmas.

Instead of single arrowheads that still needed arrow shafts, the Head Staff unwrapped a bundle of

arrows, finely made. Two of the arrows were huge; long and with wicked points at the end. Jack thought they looked almost like spears.

‘Mail bodkins,’ Gwyn said, tracing a single finger down the centre of the longest arrows.

‘You didn’t specify which bow, and I know you use three,’ the Head Smith said. ‘So! Three for your recurve. One for your crossbow. Two for your longbow. Figured you’d not be able to complain then.’

‘I don’t see anything to complain about here,’ Gwyn said quietly, and he wrapped the arrows back up, carefully.

‘Now, a chain.’

The Head Smith pulled the chain out of his pocket. It was longer than Jack had expected, made of thin, tiny, interlocking pieces. Jack held his hand out and the Head Smith carefully lowered it into the palm of his hand.

‘This metal has an interesting property,’ the Head Smith said. ‘This chain won’t break unless you have the right tools to break it. And you don’t, because only a handful of fae can do it. Which is why you came to us in the first place, presumably.’

In the palm of his hand, it didn’t look like much at all; a coiled filament of delicate metal. Jack closed his fingers around it. He looked at his staff.

‘Does that mean my staff can’t be broken?’

‘Well, the wood isn’t covered *completely*, so we can’t say. But someone would really have to put their back into it. I’d say it’d be a damn sight harder to break.’

Jack remembered how awful he had felt when the Nightmare King had snapped his staff in two, and thought that having a hard-to-break staff was a good thing. He didn’t want to ever feel like that again.

‘Now. This one gave us some problems, but we wanted to get it done right, so it was worth it.’

Jack stepped back nervously as the seven foot tall blacksmith stepped forwards with the wrapped axe. Jack watched him unwind the cloth, feeling himself grow afraid. He didn’t want to see it. This, more than anything, more – even – than his staff, was the reminder that he couldn’t get the sword back again.

Jack gasped as the weapon was revealed. Gwyn murmured in quiet appreciation.

It was a long, double-bladed axe, designed for a strong, powerful, tall warrior. The wood of the handle was black, and augmented with some of the same metal particles that covered the entirety of Jack’s staff. The blades were...

Jack’s eyes widened.

‘The lunar alphabet,’ he whispered, staring at the silvery ornate lettering that had been traced onto the black metal on the flat of the axe-blades. ‘You... but how?’

‘We copied it down of course,’ the Head Smith said, as though Jack was stupid, ‘and then incorporated it into the final design. Don’t know what it means, but... there was a lot of writing in the sword. Didn’t want to lose it. Maybe it said something important. Maybe it was a recipe for

mead. Who knows?’

The flat of the axe blades themselves were made of an opaque black metal, the one that Gwyn must have asked for. But the sharpest points of the axe blades, curving down symmetrically on both sides, gleamed a white-silver metal sharpened to a wicked point; Pitch’s sword repurposed. And across both sides of the double blades, the lunar alphabet, carefully lettered, painstakingly etched in the same metal of the sword itself.

It was a weapon both terrible and beautiful.

‘We did the best we could,’ the Head Smith said, staring up at the blades. ‘It was criminal to ruin a sword like that. Would that I could meet the smiths who made it.’

‘It’s very fine,’ Gwyn said, as the other smith started to wrap the axe back up again. When it was fully wrapped, the Head Smith handed the axe to Jack, but Gwyn took it in both of his hands.

‘Now that he no longer has to carry the sword for himself, I think it might be best if I shouldered this beast.’

After that, they said their goodbyes. The Head Smith and Iskala followed them all the way to the entrance of their caves. Jack couldn’t tell exactly – it wasn’t like they were smiling or more cheerful than usual – but he thought the Head Smith seemed happier with them now that the transaction had been completed and all the new items had been made.

As they were waved off, the Head Smith called out:

‘Good luck! But I’m not holding out much hope, if I’m honest!’

Jack shook his head.

‘Then I guess you don’t know me very well!’ he called back.

As Gwyn and Jack walked away, Gwyn looked down at Jack.

‘That was bravado, wasn’t it?’ he said.

Jack looked at Gwyn, glad that he seemed mostly free of his dra’ocht. He’d gone back to thinking of Gwyn as an irritating ally.

‘Oh man, you have no idea.’

Gwyn laughed to himself in appreciation. Jack’s lips quirked into a smile.

He stopped and took out the locket, threaded it onto the chain while he leaned his staff against himself, and then he double looped it around his neck. He tucked the locket down under his sweatshirt and hid the chain beneath the material as much as he could. He felt strange wearing it, but he hadn’t wanted to leave the likeness of Pitch’s daughter in his pocket like that. He could feel the metal against his skin; not cold, exactly, but a pressure reminding him that he couldn’t give up.

Gwyn placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder, Jack flinched. It was the closest Gwyn had come to him, since Jack had kissed him. He was worried about the glamour affecting him.

‘What?’ he said. Gwyn looked as if he knew exactly what Jack was worried about.

‘We don’t have to descend the mountain. The transaction is done. Let’s go.’

Gwyn dissolved them both into light.

\*

Later, at North's Workshop, Gwyn laid the axe in its wrappings carefully on Pitch's unmade bed. Jack stood in the doorway, feeling numb. It was the first time he'd seen Pitch's bed since the battle. North hadn't made it, and the elves and the yeti had left it alone. It looked like it had just been slept in. It looked like any moment, the person who it belonged to would be returning. Would come home.

Jack remembered that the reason it wasn't made, was that Pitch and Jack had been lying on it together. He remembered that Pitch hadn't bothered to neaten the bed before they'd headed off to the school.

As though he'd expected to return to make it later.

Jack stared at the wrinkles and creases and folds and thought he was a balloon floating above himself, somewhere far away.

Gwyn walked past him, pulled the door closed so that Jack couldn't see the bed anymore.

'I'll be back later, for training,' Gwyn said, and Jack stared at him in shock.

*'Today?'*

'Yes. See you then!'

Before Jack could protest, could ask for some time to bury himself in sleep, Gwyn simply melted into light. Jack's numbness evolved into irritation.

'Stupid Gwyn and his stupid training,' Jack muttered, rubbing a hand across his forehead, wondering – not for the first time – what the hell he'd gotten himself into.

He looked around the rest of the Workshop, considering. He felt like he'd changed since scaling the mountain to visit the Glasera dwarves. He had a shiny lacquer on his staff to prove it. He knew that toys were important, he *knew* that, but he also couldn't help but wonder how much stronger North would be if the yeti put down their toymaking and helped to fortify the factory. He looked at windows and entrances and measured them in terms of their vulnerability to attack. This was the place where the Nain Rouge had stormed the Workshop, attacking North. It was a place only safe from the Unseelie Court because it was now warded.

Jack found North in one of his many design rooms. This one held shelf after shelf of teleporting snowglobes, each globe containing a constant swirl of snow and clouds, lightning and flashes of coloured light. North screwed another globe of glass into a new base and then fumbled and almost dropped it when he saw Jack.

*'Jack!'* North said, beaming, 'I have been thinking of you! It is so good to see you!'

He stood up, and Jack tried to wave him back down again, but North was having none of it. In two giant steps he'd reached Jack and was spreading his arms for a hug that would envelop him with warmth and the smell of baked goods and the reminder of what it was like to be cared for and Jack just didn't *want* it. He stepped back, holding up a hand, hoping North would understand.

Expressions played over North's face. First confusion, then hurt, and finally – in the way he sighed hugely and dropped his arms – something like disappointment.



'Can I tell you something? A secret? You cannot tell anyone,' North said seriously.

'I- Sure,' Jack said, disconcerted.

North looked down at his own hands, and then back up at Jack. He looked lost. His thick, black eyebrows twisted together.

'I saw little girl. So little. And she was not breathing, Jack. Her little body on that floor at school gym. I am not as hardened or fierce as I used to be. The passing of time, ah, it has changed me. I could not save little girl, but I became certain to check all Guardians were okay, at least. This is my job, yes? This is part of my purpose. But I could not stop thinking about little girl, and of you and how you helped the other children. I thought of your strength, in that school. I think of it since, many, many times. My secret is that I *miss* you, Jack. I miss you, and now you don't let me embrace you, like friends?'

Jack closed his eyes. That little girl – *Stacey* – and the friend who had seen her die – Patty – the one who had bravely picked up Jack's snowballs and helped to throw them at the other children, ensured that no one else had died. At the time, he'd decided that he would follow up on Patty, make sure she was okay. But in the aftermath, he'd not been able to find the time. He couldn't have predicted that his concentration would be taken up with making sure he could get Pitch back.

'Maybe if I stand here quietly,' North said, 'you will come up and give me a quick embrace.'

Jack shook his head, but a smile crept over his face all the same. It was novel to feel like he had something to offer someone else. That he could be missed. He'd spent so long seeking affection that it was strange to realise that someone might want it in return, from *him*.

Jack stepped forwards and wrapped his arms around North's middle, smelling ginger and soot, honey and something like motor oil. The paranoia he'd had of crying or breaking apart simply by being near North was not coming to pass. He squeezed harder, closed his eyes when North laid a broad, gentle hand over his shoulder.

'There,' North said. 'This part is easy part. You are changing, but you do not have to become stranger, no?'

Jack stepped back and looked up at North, offered an apologetic smile. He had thought that North would try and force him to change his mind about rescuing Pitch, he had thought that North would want him to become emotional and deal with his loss, that he would want Jack to move on.

North gasped when he saw Jack's staff. He held a hand out in a simple question, and Jack placed it into his palm. North's fingers curled around it, and he gazed at it, and then his eyes widened impossibly.

'No, you could not,' North said in shock. 'This feels like magic metal, the kind Pitch...'

'I had to,' Jack said quickly, feeling like he was practicing for Pitch's reaction when he saw what Jack had done.

'But who did this? Who turned sword to this? Even I do not have skills for this. Most would not. The craftsmanship is very fine, look at that, it reminds me of Glasera work. Robust. Intricate. Beautiful.' North kept turning the staff, staring at it from every direction, and then finally handed the staff back to Jack. 'Who did this?'

'It's Glasera work,' Jack said, uncomfortably.

North laughed in complete disbelief, the booming sound lasting as long as it took for North to realise that Jack hadn't moved, his expression hadn't changed, that he wasn't joking.

'You scaled mountain?' North said, and Jack nodded.

'Gwyn helped.'

'Jack,' North breathed. 'Jack, I did not think- I should have seen that you would do anything, but I did not imagine well enough what that anything would be.'

'Actually,' Jack said quickly, because he wanted to put the events on the mountain behind him.

'Actually, I'm here to ask you a favour. But I have to sort of draw it out. Can I draw on your window?'

'I have paper,' North said, brow furrowing, but Jack flew over to the window he'd indicated when North didn't say no. Pen ink didn't behave in his hands, pencils were crude and graphite shattered, chalk froze and disobeyed; frost and his fingers would do just fine. He iced the window up quickly, making sure he let it move over the glass pane evenly. He was aware of how precious his frost was, these days. Spending days on the mountain unable to use his powers, and now knowing that they were even more reduced than they used to be, left him more aware of his limitations than ever before. It hadn't been so long ago, but he could hardly remember how freely he would use his powers, taking them for granted, assuming they would always be abundantly available.

'I want to focus the light that Gwyn makes,' Jack said, hovering as he sketched the first concept into the window. 'Something like this...'

'A laser?' North said, quietly. He stepped closer and peered at the design while Jack quickly started sketching out his second idea. This one would take longer to convey, since it wasn't like anything he'd ever seen before. 'How did you think of this?'

'Well, ice, of course,' Jack said, as he drew circle after circle, and connected them together with lines. 'Because clear ice is-'

'This is very clever,' North said, and Jack ignored the way he said it some surprise. He got it, already, he was no genius mastermind or anything. Previously he'd been using most of his inventiveness to figure out how to make the best snow days, and how to cheer kids up, and how to make sure sleds took the most exciting paths possible. He could forgive North being surprised that Jack had anything of *this* in him.

'Yeah, but can you *do* it?' Jack said, floating back once he finished the second drawing. 'I don't even know if either of these will work. We need....prototypes, or something.'

North nodded, and then pointed at Jack's second design.

'This is being high-tech snowball.'

Jack laughed, because that was exactly what it looked like. Or a soccer ball gone terribly wrong. He was less confident in the second design, since he'd never really studied science and he only knew about light and what it could do from seeing how sunlight played in icicles and snow and ice. He was working off instinct, he could only suggest the ideas of the objects, and hope North caught on.

Jack looked at the 'high-tech snowball' drawn into the frost on the window, and pushed his palms out over it, closing his eyes in concentration. He drew the shape forth into three-dimensional frost particles, spinning it slowly so that North might be able to see it more clearly.

North made a sound of realisation, and then stared at Jack in shock.

‘Jack, this is *serious* weapon.’

‘Yeah, yeah here’s hoping. If you can make it, it’s going to be a very serious weapon, I know.’

Jack let the ice crystals fall away, crouched on the tip of his staff as he settled in front of North again.

‘I am having ideas already,’ North said, ‘I can start today, if you like.’

‘Anyone ever tell you that you’re awesome?’ Jack said, and hopped down to the ground and turned to leave, wondering if he could catch a nap before Gwyn arrived. Given the option, he wanted to sleep for days, but the locket against his skin reminded him that it could wait. He could rest at his leisure later. Not now.

He turned, surprised, when North walked forwards and blocked the exit. It was easy to forget that North could be fast, since he carried all his bulk with him. But he was fit and muscular beneath his size and tattoos.

‘What are the bloodstains on your clothing?’ North said, eyes narrowing, and Jack frowned. He’d forgotten he was still wearing the same hoodie he’d worn up the mountain. The same one that had stuck to the blood on his back.

‘The mountain had its hard moments.’ It was all Jack was willing to say on the matter. He didn’t know when he’d find time to steal another sweatshirt. He had to stop ruining his clothing with blood. Perhaps it said something about his life choices. Maybe he could just steal a whole lot at once and stash them somewhere.

‘I have clothes that fit you, like this, in storage. Yeti – David – will get them for you. And will clean this one too. They are very good at these things.’

Jack pursed his lips, tilted his head.

‘North, are you saying that you have replacement clothing for me? In your Workshop?’

North flushed, and then laughed.

‘I make toys. Clothes. Cannot help it. Now! One more thing, before you leave.’

North’s expression became sombre, and Jack closed his eyes. *Here it comes, some kind of lecture.*

‘I know, Jack. I know you are not dealing with things,’ North said, and Jack rolled his eyes.

‘I’m dealing *fine*, North. Look at me, it’s not like I’ve spent my days huddled up whimpering in a ball in my shack or in the room you gave me. I have a job to do, I’m focused, and you know, I think I’m doing okay.’

‘No, I *know*,’ North said, stubbornly. ‘When was the last time you visit children? Make snow day? Feel like throwing snowballs? I *know*, Jack.’

Now that Jack knew more about centres, thanks to Gwyn, he understood what North was referring to. When was the last time he’d felt like throwing snowballs? Holding a snow day? It wasn’t that long ago that he had felt like he was dragged into a war that wasn’t his to begin with; that he wanted nothing to do with. Now, he couldn’t imagine being so carefree. Something twinged inside

of him, a small and tiny spasm inside of his stomach, but it was easy enough to dismiss.

‘North...’ Jack said, wishing he knew what to say.

‘I wish I could do more,’ North said. ‘I will be here though, when you are starting to deal with these things. And you will. And when I see that it is starting, I will not wait for you this time. I will try and be there.’

He didn’t know what to say. He had never thought that North could be like this to him. At some point North had changed from behaving in the way Jack expected he would, to behaving in a way that Jack had barely dared hope for. He found himself grateful, with no way to convey it.

‘Do you think my centre will ever be fun again?’ Jack said, the words escaping his mouth before he realised how heavily the question had been weighing on him.

North smiled sadly.

‘It is still there, somewhere. I am sure. It is just being rotated out of the centre. Maybe for you, it is like clock. When the time is right, it will return.’

Jack couldn’t help but return North’s smile at the image he’d evoked. Jack didn’t know if he was right, didn’t even know if he *wanted* North to be right. Maybe if he’d been a little less focused on fun, he would have been better prepared when the Nain Rouge attacked him. He would have been more able to sit in on meetings and actually offer something useful before the shadows had possessed Pitch. There were consequences that came with every centre – Jack understood that now – he didn’t know if he was ready to accept the particular consequences associated with having a centre of fun.

\*

Gwyn was able to make the golden light detach from his sword in a separate beam now, and had obviously been working hard at it; but Jack could see that it was clearly a poor imitation of what Pitch had been able to create.

But Jack couldn’t throw stones on the matter. Even his own frost and snow was a poor imitation of what he used to be able to call into existence. It wasn’t the metal on the staff that was the problem, he could tell. The Head Smith had been right, he had preserved Jack’s ability to use the staff as a channel for his powers perfectly; if anything, Jack sometimes suspected the metal actually strengthened or enhanced what he was doing, though he couldn’t tell how, and he thought that he was just telling himself that to justify what he’d done to Pitch’s sword. Besides, even if it was enhancing his powers, he wasn’t as powerful as he had been. Sometimes it was important to just make the best of a bad situation.

And a bad situation was definitely training with Gwyn.

He’d thought that training with Pitch was bad enough, but Pitch had actually relented when Jack hit his limits, and Gwyn showed no signs of letting up. He demanded that Jack copy stances, that he *observe* closely, and the look of disappointment on his face when Jack missed something, or simply wasn’t paying attention, was profound enough that Jack wanted to avoid it. But he never managed to avoid it, and it seemed like Gwyn’s face was going to set permanently in a glower of disapproval.

Jack wasn’t good at copying others. He wasn’t skilled at this unnatural method of observation. Not only that, but Gwyn’s battle technique was not particularly fluid and didn’t suit the way he liked to

move. It was difficult to make the light-infused snow with him. Unlike Pitch, Gwyn could not just sent ray after ray of strong, powerful light into the air. Jack couldn't just fly and wait for one to overtake him, before he seeded it with snow and frost. He had to keep his eyes on the ground, had to catch the ray of light before it burnt out, and it was almost always too weak to seed by the time it reached Jack.

In the end, he realised he may have to start seeding them from the ground, and *then* get into the air to create the storms. But he didn't know if there'd be enough light for more than a small cloud, and he didn't know how long it would last.

He was tired, frustrated, annoyed at Gwyn's lack of ability and annoyed at his own fatigue. Several times his hands had clenched around his staff in anger, and he'd had to restrain himself from simply sending a bolt of frost lightning towards Gwyn and then flying off in the opposite direction.

Jack was sick of it when Gwyn tried to get him to copy a drill that clearly wasn't designed for his staff, his body. It was so counter-intuitive to everything he knew that he slammed the butt of his staff down into compacted snow and glared. He ignored the frost lightning that accidentally shot from the end of his staff.

Gwyn returned Jack's glare with a scowl of his own, and they faced each other stubbornly.

'You can throw as many tantrums as you like,' Gwyn said, '*You* committed to this, and you committed because you *know* it's necessary. You can't tell me after today that we're in good shape to go up against the Nightmare King, or *anyone* at this point.'

Jack didn't want to hear logic, didn't want Gwyn to be right.

'You can't keep telling me what to do like this! You're not even- I'm not *like* you! I'm not *like* Pitch!'

Jack gritted his teeth, he became aware of how much of his anger was directed at himself. He looked down at the ground, something like acid rocketing through him.

He couldn't tell Gwyn that he secretly wanted to be able to do this, that he had hoped it would be easy to do now that his centre had changed. He couldn't say that the idea of making Pitch or Gwyn proud appealed to him, because that was laughable, wasn't it? He didn't *do* things like that. He wasn't good at making people proud of him; not so long ago, he wasn't even good at being noticed. He felt the truth of Gwyn's statements as a personal condemnation; he wasn't like Gwyn, or Pitch. His best had to be enough, it *had* to be, but-

'Then tell *me* what to do,' Gwyn said, his eyes fierce. 'If I have to switch who's in charge of who in order to make this work, then I'll do it. Go on. Take over. You direct this.'

Jack stared in shock. Gwyn's expression seemed to say, 'Well? I'm waiting,' and Jack ignored it while he considered his abrupt change in circumstances.

If he could control what they worked on, where would he start? What would he do?

'You're always making the light with those drill movements Pitch taught you,' Jack said, thoughtfully. 'Do you ever just improvise? Like, surely you'd have a natural fighting style? I mean, you could manipulate light way before Pitch, right? That's a thing you can do?'

'My innate light isn't effective against the shadows,' Gwyn said.

'Yeah, well, we know that. I just- You ever considered trying to be a bit more organic about it?'

Maybe it'd make the light stronger, if it came more naturally. It's hard to seed clouds from the ground. Snow doesn't work like that. It falls from the *sky*. And sure, I can make it at our level,' Jack waved his staff across his body and a snow flurry followed, before falling towards the ground, 'but it's going to be super weak, if we do that.'

Jack waved his staff again thoughtfully, looked at the snow that followed it, and then thought about how else they could use the golden light. It refused to meld with the frost lightning, but there were other forms of ice, other ways they could possibly distribute it.

'How's your cold tolerance?' Jack said, smiling.

Gwyn shrugged, as though cold was no matter to him.

Jack hopped lightly into the air, though he stayed very low to the ground. In almost no time at all, he'd dropped the air temperature further, created a thick mist of diamond dust; the tiny ground-level ice crystals that hung lightly in the air. In the end, he'd created enough that visibility had dropped, and Jack landed near Gwyn, satisfied with it.

'Can you infuse this with the golden light?'

Gwyn used one of the drills that Pitch had taught him, and Jack noticed that Gwyn didn't move as seamlessly as Pitch did. Pitch had used his sword as though it was an extra limb in a complicated dance. Gwyn made the movements more purposeful, but in doing so, took away some of their fluidity.

Still, he made a flare of golden light, and the ice crystals hung onto it, slowed its progression and held it longer than the clear air had. It took at least twice as long to dissipate. Jack thought of the possibilities. It could be a temporary barrier perhaps, it could be used to distract. It was no giant cumulonimbus infused with light, but it had potential.

Gwyn turned to Jack, a spark in his pale eyes.

'We should have done this earlier,' he said. 'Now, do you want me to do it again?'

'Yeah,' Jack said, relieved that Gwyn no longer looked disappointed, 'yeah, that would be great.'

\*

Jack's life took on a pattern that was painfully familiar. He trained during the day, and he slept at night, having worked himself into exhaustion. It was a familiarity that made him think of Pitch, of how he'd spent himself up leading up to the battle with the Nain Rouge, with August Each Uisge.

In the evenings, he slept on Sandy's sand-cloud, whether Sandy was there or not. Sandy's quiet company was one of the few things that allowed him to fall asleep more peacefully, it eased the grinding, relentless pain in his heart. It made the hard ice he'd formed around the core of himself seem clearer, as though he could see through it to what he was trying to achieve. And while Sandy didn't give him good dreams – he seemed to be able to tell that Jack couldn't bear them – there was something about sleeping on the golden sand that just acted like a gentle sleep tonic.

Sandy was also very tired, working more fervently than ever to send good dreams out to those who needed them during a time when people were increasingly stressed and anxious. And between that, he kept poring through threads and strands of golden sand, looking for tiny pieces of Mora.

Sandy benefitted from their symbiotic arrangement. The transparent metallic coating on Jack's staff had the power to keep the Nightmare King away. And while he carried it near him, the Nightmare

King couldn't penetrate his mind, and he left Sandy alone if they slept at the same time. When Jack realised this, he'd shared the information with Gwyn, who had then left three of his new arrows with North. One arrowhead for each of the remaining Guardians; North, Toothiana and Bunnymund. They had each been plagued by harrowing nightmares whenever they dared rest. North had tried to refuse, but Gwyn insisted, maintaining that they would be easy enough to pick up again when they were no longer necessary.

Gwyn's faith that Jack would find a way to get Pitch back was terrifying. Jack hadn't done anything to earn that faith, and it made him fear that he would only end up disappointing everyone.

The swirling black dust-cloud that was Mora hadn't seemed to mind the metal from Pitch's sword touching Jack's staff too much, but even so, Jack had asked Sandy about it. Whether it would hurt her. Sandy had made a long string of symbols that didn't make any sense and ended with an exclamation mark and a light-bulb that meant he had an idea. Jack still wasn't skilled at understanding Sandy's symbolic language, but he found it easy to trust Sandy's intentions.

His days were spent checking in with North and the quiet awe that came from seeing something he'd drawn into *frost*, being turned into real, functional objects. He spent afternoons training, surprised that Gwyn had been serious about allowing him to take the lead. Ever since that day, Gwyn waited for Jack to direct him. There were times where he argued, times where his eyes flared with anger or disapproval, but there were also times where he patiently explained his point or suggested another way of doing something. There were even times when Gwyn watched him in a considering manner, appraising.

Jack learned that as a leader, he could be inventive, and that he was willing to do something over and over again if people weren't telling him to do it; but if someone told him to do something, he put his back up and refused, even if he could see the merits of doing it. He didn't have the time to wonder where that came from, or the time to change it; so he accepted it instead. He gained a sense of his strengths and weaknesses, and Gwyn's as well. It became easier to dismiss the dra'ocht, the more he began to get a sense of Gwyn. He saw more distinctions between Gwyn and Pitch. They had elements in common, certainly, but Gwyn was nothing like Pitch, and as Jack came to understand that, he gained a better understanding of how Gwyn moved through the world.

It was that increasing synchronisation that allowed them to spontaneously develop new drills that merged their abilities together in a way that took advantage of their strengths. Jack could seed the storm clouds from the ground after all, if he called a wind to him first that would sweep the snow and ice crystals upwards. The technique of infusing diamond dust with light could be used to create a brief dome of light around them both that would temporarily keep shadows at bay and allow them to focus on other attacks.

Jack walked a tightrope between allowing himself to feel hopeful that all of his efforts would be successful, and wondering how *anything* would ever be effective against the Nightmare King, let alone the rest of the Unseelie Court. Hope hurt badly, when he re-entered reality and considered what he was up against. And if he let himself consider how futile their task was, the pit of despair inside of him yawned open, maw hungry and waiting to swallow him whole.

Jack felt as though he was on the precipice of something terrible. Training distracted him. Sleep allowed him to bury his awareness of it. But between those things, he felt like he was being eroded. His internal landscape was being scoured with Antarctic winds. He had imagined the core of ice and resolve within himself strengthening so often, that he was finding it hard to feel anything at all with clarity. Emotions were unclear and jagged, and whenever he didn't like them, he pushed them down. Unfortunately, he didn't like any of his emotions. Whether good or bad, they were all minefields. Nothing was trustworthy.

He knew he'd changed and was still changing. He thought that if he just stopped long enough to see how much, he'd regret it, he'd realise that something had gone terribly wrong.

That just made him work harder.

He didn't have time to focus on anything else except getting Pitch back.

He would know what to do.

\*

As the sun set, causing puffs of altocumulus to glow gold and then pink, one of the yeti approached Gwyn and Jack in the training arena and waved them both inside. Jack lowered his staff, Gwyn sheathed his sword, and Jack found himself clenching his hands together in excitement. When he'd checked in on North that morning, North had pushed him out of the door, saying, 'Too close to end now to show you, must wait!'

*Could they be ready?*

'I forgot to ask earlier, but anymore reports about the Unseelie Court?' Jack asked, as Gwyn walked up the steps and Jack floated next to him.

'Nothing new. Albion reports that he's won back several aquifers and other water sources throughout the United Kingdom, but it's a tentative victory. He's a sea wight trying to reclaim freshwater for weaker fae. Still, no new confirmed sightings of the Nightmare King outside of nightmares being sent out en masse, and nothing of Augus Each Uisge either. To tell the truth, I like it more when I know what they're doing. Not this preternatural quiet.'

Jack didn't know what he preferred. Gwyn had taken up the habit of telling Jack how many new fae were without homes, how many were wasting away without access to their lakes, how many landscapes were becoming bleached of their life-force. Humans were calling the subsequent land disease that caused plants to shrivel and soils to lose their nutriment; the Blight. It only affected certain places, locations where land spirits had been forcibly ousted. Gwyn said that nothing like it had ever happened in his living memory, for a fae King to abuse his power to such a degree that it would destroy landscapes like this.

The idea that the Nightmare King and the Each Uisge were not working at their full strength, and that the Blight, the deaths of fae, removing them from their homes, was their version of 'laying low,' filled Jack with horror. What possible endgame could Augus have?

'Even if we destroy all of the shadows, even if that were ever possible, which Pitch always said it wasn't – Augus would keep doing this, wouldn't he?'

Gwyn sighed.

'He needs to be forcibly removed from Kingship, and that's a complicated matter in our world. When you can't kill someone outright, everything becomes far more convoluted. The Unseelie and Seelie fae vote in their Kings or Queens, but once voted in, royalty either steps down voluntarily, or is forcibly demoted by having the bulk of their powers removed. There is no easy way to vote someone out, there is no recourse for the Unseelie fae who are also being ousted from their homes. It's a system that's worked for us for millennia. The Oak King and the Raven Prince were both successful regents, and it wasn't until Augus that things have been so unstable.

'But one thing at a time. The Nightmare King comes first, Augus will be easier to deal with if we can strip him of that ally. Though...still not exactly easy. The Each Uisge was very powerful long



before he became King, and once one steps into Kingship, that power multiplies.'

'Sounds like he just went full out power crazy, if you ask me,' Jack said, rolling his eyes.

Gwyn didn't reply. His face had become gloomy, as it often did whenever he brought up matters of the Seelie or Unseelie Court. Jack got the strong impression that if Gwyn could throw away his Kingship, he would have done it the day he'd been voted in. He'd never put himself up as candidate; the Seelie fae had decided without him, and once the decision had been made, he wasn't able to demote himself until three centuries had passed. The more Jack found out about the fae, the more they didn't make *any* sense.

The yeti waited impatiently by the doorway, while Gwyn and Jack entered one of the large toy testing rooms.

Jack thought North would present the weapons with fanfare. He thought that maybe he'd cover them with a sheet first and whip it off with a flourish. But instead they were just *there* on a wooden table, hundreds of pieces of metal, glass, crystal and other materials scattered around them. Tiny wrenches and chisels and hammers lay everywhere.

'Look at *that*,' Jack breathed, walking straight up to them. 'That's amazing! That I can draw something and you can just do this! I don't even know what half of these things do! And this? This is way bigger than I envisioned. But this?' Jack picked up what North had called the 'high-tech snowball,' 'This is exactly what I thought it would be.'

'I don't understand,' Gwyn said in confusion. 'What am I looking at?'

'I want to test these,' Jack said, looking at North, ignoring Gwyn. 'But I think we should hike out a ways from the Workshop, in case the light becomes destructive to more than just the shadows. You know, don't want to blow up the Workshop or anything. Do you know a place?'

'Presuming they even work, of course!' North said, smiling at Jack's wonder. Jack didn't dare touch the weapons himself, in case he ruined their delicate craftsmanship with his ice, but he hovered his palms and fingers over them. 'There is big forest behind mountains. Uninhabited.'

'If someone could just tell me what *that* is for...' Gwyn said, pointing to the circular device made of interconnected, small circular disks.

'Okay, okay,' Jack said. He pointed to the first weapon, the one that looked like some sort of fragile, delicate gun made of transparent materials, thin wires, panels and panes of mirrors and crystal. North had made it larger, and Jack could see why. North had factored into account that it was hard to create single, narrow rays of light, and created an attachment device that would absorb a broader ray of light.

'This is like a laser. I'm hoping that if you put a ray of light here, it'll come out the other end as a narrow, focused, hyper-charged beam. And this one? It's the same thing. Except... like, about ten or fifteen narrow, focused, hyper-charged beams that will spread in all directions. But you know, it'd be better to just *show* you.'

'Now?' Gwyn said, and Jack started to nod, and then shook his head. His excitement was getting the better of him. It probably wouldn't make the most sense for both of them to try out the weapons on low energy.

'Tomorrow.'

Gwyn looked at the weapons as though he wasn't quite certain of them. But before Jack could say

anything reassuring about it, Gwyn had teleported away.

'I *hate* it when he does that,' Jack grumbled.

North laughed.

'I suppose I should be showing you how these are going to be working, yes?' North said, and Jack yawned hugely, before nodding. The whole day was bearing down upon him, as it often did around sunset. One moment, he'd be going along just fine, the next, exhaustion would powerhouse into him like a reckless animal. At Jack's yawn, North stepped away from the work table, and beckoned with his finger.

'I show you tomorrow morning. Hm? There are fresh cookies out of the oven, and sometimes it is better to get to them before the elves have licked every one. Come then, these will wait.'

Jack followed, too tired to argue.

\*

Gwyn came back with his soldiers late the next morning, and Jack kept spinning his staff nervously, worried that the weapons wouldn't work, worried that it would be back to the drawing board for new ideas.

Gwyn teleported them into the forest that North had mentioned, along with the weapons, and Jack looked around at the trees close by and decided they would – at least – need a clearing. It was a shame they didn't have a living shadow to test it on, but this was just a trial.

Jack explained how the weapons worked quickly, and when he was done, Gwyn looked down at him with wide eyes.

'When you said you had an idea, I didn't know you meant- This is like nothing I've used before.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, 'because for some reason, all of you guys are stuck in the dark ages. You know, the Nain Rouge used guns, and she was able to get ahead of everyone because of it. She didn't even need *magical* guns, just regular ones, and look what she could do. I know you don't like things like this, but step it up already. If this works, it's not going to matter how weak your light is. And if *that* works,' Jack pointed to the circular weapon, refractive disks shaped carefully together like a double-layered snowball, 'well...'

Jack looked around and saw a clear line of sight to a distant tree.

'Before we get a better location, we could at least try the single beam first, see how that goes. We might as well just find out how dangerous they are. North said if he hadn't worked out the angles properly, it could backfire pretty badly.'

'This sounds very promising already,' Gwyn said, reluctantly, as Jack and one of Gwyn's soldiers started working together to manoeuvre the gun into place. Jack had originally envisioned something simple, like the kind of fake ray-guns that kids used when pretending that they were fighting space aliens, but North had turned it into something huge, almost like a rocket launcher made of mirrors and metal, with Jack's original idea as a tiny afterthought at the end. It needed more than one person to manipulate, and it was stabilised with two sets of adjustable legs.

Jack lined up the sight, and Gwyn came over and took control, muttering something about leaving the aim of a weapon like that to someone who actually knew how to shoot an arrow.

Once it was set up, Gwyn stood behind the weapon uncertainly.

‘What now?’

‘You just slice a ray of light into it, and...we see what happens?’

Gwyn looked at the contraption in front of him sceptically, and then looked at the tree they were aiming at. He unsheathed his sword and took a few steps back, looking down at his feet and making sure they were positioned correctly. His fingers kept shifting slightly in the grip he had on his hilt, and Jack knew enough about Gwyn by now to know that he was nervous.

Jack opened his mouth to say that it would be fine, to just go ahead already, when Gwyn stepped forward and swung his sword up and then down, making a single slice of light that landed perfectly, sinking into the weapon.

The contraption vibrated, and then a high-pitched hum emitted from it. Jack’s eyes widened in alarm, and Gwyn’s soldiers quickly stepped back. Jack was just about to say that he wasn’t sure if it was supposed to do that, when the whole light-launcher turned gold and the high-pitched hum escalated until it was no longer audible, just an uncomfortable sensation inside his head.

A second later, a narrow, powerful beam of golden light – too bright for Jack to look at it – shot through the lens at the barrel and hit the tree they’d been aiming at, forty feet away.

The whole tree glowed golden, birds scattered from its branches. Jack stared with horror and awe as it began to *grow*, unnaturally. Branches burst out of its crown, twisting and writhing like snakes, leaves grew and fell and grew again, it flowered and dropped fruit and twisted metres into the sky in a matter of seconds.

And then the light died. Jack’s eyes still held the imprint of a golden streak of light across them. The tree shuddered, the weapon’s hum died down, the golden glow disappeared.

Jack risked looking at Gwyn, who was blinking at the tree over and over again, mouth half-open.

‘It’s gonna work,’ Jack said quietly. ‘The shadows, the living shadows, are the like the opposite of life and growth. They hold things back. Look at what *that* just did. A small amount of the golden light heals people. And *that* just...wow. Tell me you think the shadows could survive that. Even the Nightmare Men.’

‘I *agree*,’ Gwyn said, ‘but do you think Pitch’s *body* will survive that?’

Jack grimaced.

‘I think Pitch’s body has withstood those Nightmare Men twice now. He’s had the root of malevolence inside of him and he’s come back from *that*. And that tree is still standing. And it looks...kind of better than it did before.’

It was true. The tree didn’t look like it had aged, so much as taken on an unusual amount of *life*. Birds were flocking back to it, more than had left it when the golden light had hit it. A deer was already grazing at its roots. Whatever had happened to it wasn’t putting off the local wildlife. Its leaves were greener, its branches seemed sturdier. It was the tallest tree around.

‘I think we should find a clearing and test these out a bit more, and then decide what we’re gonna do from there, yeah?’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded.

Gwyn sent two of his soldiers off to scout for locations, and Jack – being able to fly – quickly set

off through the forest, seeking clearings.

His heart wouldn't stop hammering as he flew between trees, staying low to the ground instead of going above the canopy. Augus Each Uisge was still looking for him, and he'd gotten used to not flying too high, too often, in case one of the Each Uisge's watchers reported back to him. Apparently Unseelie fae lived everywhere, and in an unwarded forest, he didn't want to be away from Gwyn and his soldiers for too long.

The weapon had *worked*. Jack's mind was racing with questions. Would it work more than once? Would it hurt Pitch? What, exactly, would it do the shadows? What would the other weapon be like? How would they even get the Nightmare King and the weapons in the same space? What if the Nightmare King just destroyed them as soon as he saw them? What if he was too strong?

His fear wouldn't settle down. He tried to push it deep down inside, but there was too much.

*Oh, hey. Clearing.*

He slowed, looking at the trees that fringed it.

He was so busy assessing its suitability that he didn't notice the lake beneath him. He didn't notice how it wasn't frozen over, despite the frigid temperature. He didn't see the still water shift until it was too late.

Jack felt something cold and slimy slap over one of his ankles. It cinched tight, caused a flare of pain. He was dragged down rapidly, losing all sense of orientation. He turned, shouting in surprise and then horror when he saw that it was a long rope of waterweed. Fear exploded through him when he saw Augus waiting, half out of the water, bare-chested, a smirk on his face.

Jack blasted the waterweed beneath his ankle and then flew rapidly backwards, shooting a huge flare of frost lightning into the sky above him. He hoped that the soldiers would see it, that Gwyn would realise that Augus was *here*. How long had he been waiting near North's Workshop? Jack panicked when he realised that the Nightmare King could be close by, and scanned the woods as quickly as possible.

Just as he turned to get Augus in his sight again, a length of waterweed latched around his staff and yanked it out of his grip. Jack's hands clasped on thin air and he fell. He caught a glimpse of his staff being pulled down into the water. Another whipping rope of waterweed lashed around his waist. He hit the water with a shriek, tearing at the weed, unable to get a purchase on its slimy grip. He flooded the water with frost, freezing it, and Augus chuckled as he swam languidly towards him, melting the water around him with his very presence.

When Augus reached him, Jack struck out wildly. His open palm made contact with Augus' shoulder, and Jack yanked his hand back to strike again, only to find that it was stuck fast against Augus' skin.

*No!* Jack tugged and tugged, but his skin was stuck to Augus', and he remembered abruptly that one of Augus' powers – the one he used most often when drowning his victims – was the ability to make others stick to him, unable to tear themselves away.

'Let me go!' Jack yelled, and Augus took the hand that was stuck to his shoulder by the wrist, and then reached out with supernatural speed and took his other wrist, transferring them both into a single grip.

'Dear me, Jack Frost. Is your golden warrior not here to save you, this time?'

Jack opened his mouth to scream for Gwyn, and August backhanded him with his free hand. Jack's head rocked, the side of his head flared with a sudden burst of pain.

*'Silence.'*

The compulsion struck Jack with full force, his voice stolen right out of his throat. He kicked out in the water, frustrated at how it dragged at his limbs, slowed them down. He was still able to connect the heel of his foot with August's shin, but August only clucked his tongue.

*'Stop fighting me.'*

Jack's body sagged, limp. It was nothing like the first time he'd experienced August's compulsion, when he'd been filled with a strange, relaxing lassitude. His horror continued to build inside of him. His limbs ached with the need to thrash and get away, but he couldn't move. He couldn't make a single sound of protest.

'Jack Frost,' August said grimly. 'You are a surprisingly hard frost spirit to get a hold of these days. How delightful that I managed to catch you, then. Now, how would you like to join me for some tea and some conversation?'

August rested Jack on the water and left him floating, and Jack's eyes rolled in time to catch the Each Uisge calmly shedding his human form. Jack's throat worked, wanting to eject the fear he felt vocally, but he couldn't. He could only stare as August's bones shifted, as his eyes turned into black wells with glowing green centres, as his face lengthened and hair sprouted from his skin. His ears grew into furry black horse's ears, his hair lengthened into a lustrous, green-black mane. In under a minute, he was no longer a man, but a black waterhorse with a deep, green shine that rippled like water over his hair. It was a creature that had never been human, a creature that had never cared for humans except as prey and food; mouth filled with rows of sharp, rotting teeth. The waterhorse opened that awful maw wide, and Jack's whole body shivered helplessly, straining against the compulsion as he saw teeth descending towards him.

The Each Uisge sank his jaws deep into Jack's side, grabbing hold of him. The explosion of pain that sawed through him was made all the worse by the fact that he couldn't *do* anything about it.

The waterhorse kicked away from the shore and moved through the water like no creature should be able to, deciding its own buoyancy with thought, paying no mind to physics.

*'You can start fighting again, now, if you wish,'* the Each Uisge said in a terrible, unnatural voice. It was a sound that pushed deep into his mind and released him from the compulsion.

Jack opened his mouth to shout for help, just as the Each Uisge dragged him underwater.

The water that covered his head refused to freeze, and Jack looked up at the clear sky that was disappearing from view through disturbed water.

It was all too familiar.

He opened his mouth in terror and water flooded it. He writhed in the waterhorse's grip, but he only succeeded in hurting himself further. It felt like there was something corrosive in the waterhorse's teeth. He could feel each of the tiny points underneath his skin, the whole side of his torso burnt terribly. He knew he was bleeding. Water pushed its way into his lungs, his nose, his mouth, his ears. He forgot that he wasn't human anymore, that he couldn't drown again.

Jack screamed.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Just a Pawn,' Augus Each Uisge decides to make good on earlier threats he's made to a certain thorn in his side; one Jack Frost.

# Just a Pawn

## Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING: Mind Control, Sexual Assault, Blood/Gore, Disturbing Themes

\*

My endless thanks for those who have given kudos, subscribed, bookmarked and commented. And to the lurkers. Lurkers are awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*He was drowning.*

Jack was mindless in his struggles, ripping flesh as he thrashed beneath the Each Uisge's teeth. He was dragged further and further down into the gloomy deep.

The Each Uisge paused in his descent, chuckled in a low, resounding voice that echoed through Jack's head. It was a voice that reflected his current appearance, a voice that people dreaded sounding by misty lakesides, a voice that heralded death.

*'You seem to have a fear of drowning. How quaint. Were you not aware that ice floats?'*

Jack turned and struck out, his fingers twisted into claws. He raked nails down the waterhorse's face but his hands only slipped off, his nails wouldn't dig in. When he came close to touching one of the Each Uisge's eyes, the horse shook his head rapidly, snapping Jack back and forth. Jack, disoriented, head spinning, continued to struggle weakly. The Each Uisge took Jack further down into the water. In his peripheral vision he caught sight of his staff, secured in a rope of waterweed that waved lazily, an animated tentacle of green.

August approached a huge, green dome, lit from within. He circled easily down towards it, landed on the lakebed and then walked through the magical, giant bubble calmly, placing his hooves with neat precision. As Jack was pushed through, gravity pulled him sharply towards the ground. The dome kept out the water, he was no longer buoyant.

He was dropped unceremoniously to the ground, coughing up water even as he hit the dirt. He heaved up mouthfuls of lake, splattering the ground around him. He rolled over to curl around the side of himself that was bleeding, punctured heavily by August's wide bite. It sent burning waves of pain through him, his back cramped. As soon as the paroxysms of coughing started to abate, he pushed himself upright, staggered towards the barrier of the dome, knowing that he needed to escape, all of Pitch's warnings about August suddenly clamouring in his head, one after the other.

*'Turn around. Stand, and face me,'* August commanded. Jack wanted to scream as his body refused to listen to his mind, as it obeyed the compulsion. He didn't understand how Pitch had been able to break it. Once he'd said that fear could do it, but Jack was terrified, and it wasn't making any difference.

He stared in horror at August, who transformed back into his human form casually, walking over to

a table made of pale, white shells where the waterweed had deposited Jack's staff. When he had finished transforming, he was bare-chested, he wore dark brown pants. His feet were bare and wet. His black hair dripped water as it always did, though far more rapidly than usual. August calmly reached up and squeezed the majority of water out of his hair as he looked down at the staff. He picked it up and turned it in his hands, examining it.

He approached Jack with the staff and looked at him, calculating. He reached out for Jack's hand, but Jack had been released from his compulsion to stop fighting August, and he leaned backwards as far as he could while still having to maintain the compulsion that made him stand. He jerked his hand away. His heart thundered and fluttered at the same time, his pulse hammered dissonant tunes throughout his flesh, leaving him queasy.

August smiled and took Jack's wrist, forced his palm open by digging his thumb mercilessly into nerves hiding in the fleshy, soft skin on the underside of his wrist. And then he placed Jack's staff into his hand. Jack's fingers curled automatically. He felt a moment of confused hope. Frost lightning sparked out from his staff, Jack swung his arm back, ready to attack, ready to-

*'Discharge your power into the ground. All of it.'*

Jack couldn't even vocalise the single, broken sound that stuck in his throat as he watched his own arm swing the curve of his staff sharply down to the floor of the lakebed. He closed his eyes as frost lightning, snow, ice crystals and a white-blue power surged through his staff, pounded into the earth, freezing it. He swayed as his power was depleted too quickly, pouring out of him uselessly. When he was done, his hand opened weakly around the staff and it fell, landing in the lake water he'd thrown up, clattering on the ice that he'd forced into the ground. He was unable to stop shaking, more drained than he'd been on the mountain when he was at his most taxed.

'I must say, I'm intrigued,' August said calmly, politely, as he picked up the staff from the ground and placed it back on the table. 'How curious that a weak, scrawny thing like you should be considered important. I think I would like to find out how you work. Are you in any way *necessary*? Will Gwyn ap Nudd be perturbed if I break you? Instinct tells me *yes*.'

August looked him up and down, raking him with an invasive, hungry stare that did not match the carefully arranged, inquiring look on his face.

Jack's throat strained against the silence forced upon it. Sentences pulsed through his brain. *Let me go! Gwyn will be here any minute. Is the Nightmare King here? You can't break me! Why are you doing this? Let me go!*

'I imagine you miss him,' August said, sitting down on a chair carved out of bone. Jack's eyes crawled quickly around his surroundings. The place wasn't as grandiose as he'd expected from August, and he realised that it was probably stolen or belonged to one of the freshwater fae that had been driven out of its home. There was no way August lived near North's Workshop. He vaguely remembered that his home base was in Scotland. 'Especially *now*, given your predicament. Did he warn you about me?'

Gwyn hadn't come, he didn't know if he would, or even could. He didn't know how powerful that green dome was, he didn't know how long he'd be trapped down here. He didn't know how to get back to the surface again. His staff was practically unreachable because of August's compulsion. His body was covered in a thin layer of sweat, his body temperature had risen sharply.

'*Speak*,' August said, compulsion winnowing its way into Jack's mind.

'He warned me,' Jack gasped, his voice water-wracked. 'Let me go! Let me go, I'm *nothing* to



you! I'm-'

'You will be nothing to me, once I'm done with you,' Augus said, as casually as someone might discuss the weather. 'But right now, you are *something*, because everyone else keeps deciding you are.'

'Gwyn will come, he'll-'

Augus sighed. He smiled.

'Relax, little thing, we have all the time in the world.'

'Why are you even doing this? Why the *schools*? You attacked *children*.'

'Children are delicious,' Augus said coldly, crossing one leg over the other. 'How tedious you are, trying to appeal to my humanity, when I don't have any. It wouldn't do to offend me by comparing me to the dumb animals I eat.'

'Why not?' Jack said, laughing hysterically. 'Why not? You're going to hurt me anyway, right?'

Augus smiled sweetly.

'Yes. I am. When you break someone, during a war, they become a liability. Did you know this? They become a liability to the people who care about them. First, a broken person no longer thinks the way they once did, often permanently, certainly for a time. Second, a broken person takes up the energy of those around them, even when they do not mean to, or even want to. If you are cared for, if you are *visible*, you will harm others simply by existing near them and being broken. They will think on you. They will want to help you. And soothe you. And calm you. Some may even want *vengeance*. All of these things take up time, and energy. Some of these things drive away all rational thought.'

'You're...' Jack couldn't finish his sentence. *You're a monster*. He wanted desperately to run, but compulsion held him firm. He had never felt less in control of himself. It felt like sticky fingers in his mind, turning him into someone he wasn't.

'The simple fact is that you are everywhere I turn. You dragged Pitch Black out of his lair after I had commanded him to *stay*. You were there when I visited Pitch Black at his home in Kostroma, cocky and disrespectful. You were there at the school, destroying Nightmares, assisting children. You have even been with Gwyn, *plotting*. I can't say I like you very much.'

'Have you always liked the sound of your own voice this much?' Jack said, grinding his teeth together. Augus liked to *talk*. It reminded him of the old Nightmare King, down in his lair, turning talk into torture, playing mind-games for the sheer smug pleasure of it.

Jack was scared that discharging his powers like that had sped up his inevitable wasting and death; he felt so weak. He was scared that he wouldn't be able to save Pitch. He was scared that Augus would make him forget his purpose. He was scared of what Augus might do, could *make* him do. It sent hairline cracks all the way through him.

All this time, people had warned him about Augus, but he'd never really thought that Augus would put aside his plans – whatever they were – long enough pay him any direct attention. Who was he to someone like the King of the Unseelie fae? Yet now he found himself alone with him under a magical dome, disarmed, powerless. Jack's lungs still felt full of lakewater. He was bleeding down his side.

‘Oh, are you in a hurry?’ August said, raising his eyebrows. ‘I do apologise. How I’d dislike to keep you away from prior commitments.’

He stood fluidly and Jack startled, tried to step backwards in a body that refused to listen to him. He tried again, and felt a sudden surge of anger at himself that he just couldn’t break the compulsion. Why wasn’t he as strong as the others? Why couldn’t he even fight against it a tiny amount? He couldn’t even defend himself. *Why am I like this? Damn it, move!*

‘Strip.’

Horror eclipsed his anger as the compulsion sank into his mind. Horror followed quickly by understanding. He remembered Pitch telling him, ‘The Nain Rouge will kill you quickly, but August will *not*.’ And at the time, Jack had just assumed that would mean torture – bad certainly, but not... not...

Jack’s mouth shaped around a protest as his body obeyed. He couldn’t decide who he hated more as his hands pulled his sodden pants down efficiently, as he stepped out of them and immediately reached up to remove his sweatshirt. He couldn’t decide what was worse, his own body betraying him, or August orchestrating this in the first place. He felt his weakness acutely as he dropped the sweatshirt. He gasped as he straightened, the teeth marks in his side aggravated and sent another wave of cramps through his back. He reached up to the necklace, and squeezed his eyes shut. *No, no, no, no, no. Oh god, what if I have to leave it here?*

‘Wait,’ August said, walking over to him quickly. Jack’s hands paused at the chain and his breath stuttered in his chest as August stepped into his personal space, reaching down for the locket with long fingers. He didn’t seem to notice Jack’s nudity, though Jack couldn’t stop being aware of it, wishing he had a barrier of clothing between them. ‘*Who is this?*’

‘Pitch’s daughter,’ Jack said, groaning in frustration as the words slipped from him easily. He couldn’t even pretend at resistance.

‘His daughter,’ August repeated, flatly. He twisted his fingers up in the chain and jerked hard, trying to snap it. Jack shrieked as the unbreakable chain cut into his neck. August tugged again and Jack panicked as he felt blood trickle from the wound August had created.

‘It doesn’t break! It won’t break! Take it off- Stop, wait, just-’

August reached over his head and unlooped the chain, drawing it up instead. He examined the locket closely as he walked over to the table.

‘You are keeping it safe, I suppose,’ August said softly, placing it down by Jack’s staff. ‘Would it hurt him, do you think, to destroy it?’

*Oh god.*

But August walked away from the table and back to Jack, this time taking his time looking over Jack’s body. His face was filled with a cold disgust, the corner of one lip curled up in displeasure, as though he was looking at garbage. Jack wanted to cover himself with his hands, but they were still up by his neck from when August had told him to wait. The compulsions held strong long after they’d been given, and Jack felt the rattle of each one in his head. There was barely enough room left for the knowledge that he had to get the locket back somehow, that he had to get to his staff, that he had to *leave*.

His skin prickled as August circled him slowly. He could hear his rapid, shallow breathing, the

sound of water dripping from August's hair and otherwise very little at all. It was strangely silent this far underwater, beneath the dome. August moved on his feet soundlessly. Nothing else moved in the dome with them.

August paused behind him.

'You're back is recovering from some injury, it seems. And I have simply added to its strain. How insensitive of me.'

Jack's skin crawled. He tensed, not knowing what to expect.

He shouted out, hoarse, as a hand lashed out and fingers dug deep into the teeth marks, opening them wider, causing the blood to flow more freely. The fingers withdrew and Jack tried to catch his breath again, shuddering with pain. He could sense August moving behind him, but he had no idea what he was doing.

Jack made a distressed sound behind closed lips when he felt August rest his chin on Jack's shoulder.

'Your blood tastes interesting,' August said, and Jack shook his head in denial.

'Let me go,' Jack said, knowing it was useless to even ask.

'It would be rude of me not to share. Would you like to try some?' Fingers smeared cold, thick blood over his lips and Jack jerked his head out of the way. He was surprised that August let him. But that, in a way, was worse. 'It's oddly human, but different. You were clearly dead for a time, but not anymore. I wonder...'

August knelt down behind him and Jack felt hysteria rush through him, turning him colder than he thought possible.

August placed his lips in the mockery of an open kiss by the side of the teeth marks that stretched around the front and back of his torso. August bit so hard that his teeth sunk deep, and before Jack had even registered was happening, before he could even scream from the pain of it, August had torn a lump of flesh clean off him. Jack's eyes widened when he realised he could hear the sound of *chewing*. He didn't want to hear it, didn't want to *know*, and there was only one thing he could think of to cover the sound. He screamed as loudly as he could, trying to drown out his reality, hoping that when he came back to himself he would wake up and be in Pitch's bed, or curled up in the armchair, even sleeping in a tree branch.

But his scream petered out and August was poking fingers into the wound, stirring up pain.

'It's not icing up,' August said, confused. 'This is inconvenient. *Give me your hand.*'

Jack stretched one of his hands backwards without even thinking about it, and August took it and pressed Jack's own fingers against the open wound in his back. Jack moaned as blood covered his fingers, his palm.

'Ice it.'

Jack's powers tried to obey, he felt the very core of his frost shudder and strain inside of him. But August had told him to discharge all of his power, and he wasn't around enough ambient to help him recharge his energy. He was spent.

'I am very sorry to say, you are the poorest excuse for a frost spirit I've ever met,' August said,

dropping Jack's hand and standing up. He walked back around to face Jack.

August wiped blood off the corners of his mouth with the tips of his fingers and Jack couldn't stop himself from bending over and retching at the sight of it. He managed nothing more than a tiny mist of ice crystals, and then stayed bent double, staring in horror at the sand and damp waterweed at his feet. He could see his bloodstained clothes nearby. He could feel blood trailing down his back. He'd thought the Nain Rouge was the most malicious creature he'd ever met, but she'd just been *hungry*, and she had been nothing like this.

'Here, see? It starts,' August said softly. 'And we are just beginning.'

'I thought you said you'd make me enjoy it,' Jack rasped, staring at the floor.

August laughed.

'Incorrect, I'm afraid. I said I *could* make you enjoy it.'

Jack bared his teeth at the floor and then straightened, painfully.

'Y'know, I was right, you *do* like the sound of your own voice. If you're going to rape me, or...whatever, get it over with already, so I can get back to kicking your ass again.'

August's eyes widened in momentary surprise, and then he tilted his head back and started laughing in genuine delight. A languid hand came up and rested lightly over his chest as he continued to laugh, and it was a while before he settled down again. When he lowered his head, his face was lit with good humour, his green eyes shone.

'Rape you? You flatter yourself if you think I would willingly soil myself with the likes of you, barely more than *food*. Though, if that's what you're expecting, I'd hate to disappoint. I do suppose the expectations of the guests will always trump the plans of the host.'

Jack flooded with fear, he cursed himself for saying anything at all. August was too good at twisting words, too good at turning everything back on him.

'No, I-'

'I am, always, a *most* solicitous host. *Walk to me.*'

Jack gritted out a sound of frustration as he started walking forwards. Sand stuck to his feet where blood and water had pooled underneath. He felt feverish, he couldn't tell how much of it was a result of discharging his power and how much of it was being stuck down here with August. He didn't feel very well. It was getting harder to concentrate.

He stopped a short length from August, refused to look up, refused to look at the bare chest in front of him, stared instead at the table where the locket was coiled, where his staff rested. *He can do anything he wants, but if he plans on delivering me – broken – back to Gwyn, that means I'm meant to survive this. That means I can keep working to save Pitch. That means I can stay focused. Even without the locket and the staff, I'm sure I could-*

'*Get on your knees.*'

Jack squeezed his eyes shut as he dropped. He shuddered as his legs folded beneath him. He had things he wanted to shout, scream, yell, but he didn't dare. His own words were dangerous, August turned each sentence into a trap.

Jack kept his eyes closed as time passed. August said nothing, simply waited calmly, letting the tension build. Jack knew that was what he was doing. He knew now that it was the point. And telling himself that, over and over again, wasn't stopping the fear that spread through him like cold, restless hands.

'What are you going to do?' Jack whispered.

'I'm not going to do anything,' August said, pushing fingers into Jack's hair and twisting his head to the side, roughly. 'I do what any competent leader does, I delegate.'

Jack struggled against the compulsions weaving through him. He tried to move his knees and couldn't. He leaned backwards and August only smiled. Jack's eyes were wet, but he refused to let himself cry, refused because he knew that was also the point. Because he knew that was what August wanted. It was one of the few things he still had a margin of control over.

When August compelled him to lean forwards and open his mouth, Jack experienced an abrupt shift in his consciousness. He went from feeling everything – the gritty sand and lake rocks under his knees, the lukewarm fingers in his hair, the sound of August's hair *drip, drip, dripping* constantly onto the ground, the feel of his fingernails in his palm – to feeling suddenly numb. Multiple switches were flicked off in his mind and something in his heart hardened, turned to diamond.

His mouth opened. He knew he should be terrified, screaming even. He knew that somewhere, deep down where he couldn't even see it anymore, he was fractured and trapped and mindless and screeching for escape. But he was separate from all of it. He knew his body was still struggling to get away. He could feel it in the constant aching pain of his muscles, cells locked in some endless battle against themselves, hurting each other. He could feel it in the tension through his spine, the shaking that wouldn't end. But even that felt meaningless. It didn't matter.

But then August was pushing into his mouth. Reality crashed back callously, and his mind splintered. He was fighting, he'd managed to break at least *some* of the compulsion, he was scratching hard at skin and hitting and mindless in his animal need to get away. He was choking, his mouth was full and he didn't want to think about *why* and he couldn't anyway. August demanded he stop fighting, and Jack's thought processes shattered under the force of the compulsion. It stole his purpose, it temporarily wiped his memory, and he could hear August talking but he couldn't *hear* him.

Suddenly a hand fisted into his hair and dragged him back, freed his mouth. Nails cut into his scalp and Jack cried out; overwhelmed, panicking.

'If you dare *freeze* me,' August said, threateningly, and Jack realised what had happened. The look on August's face was terrible, and Jack was locked to the ground with fear.

'I can't help it,' Jack cried, 'I can't. I can't help it, the ice is just, I can't.' *I'm sorry.*

Whatever expression was on Jack's face, August believed it, because he let go of Jack's hair and stepped backwards. He placed his member back into his pants and pursed his lips, considering.

Jack lowered his head to the floor, hyperventilating, wanting the numbness he'd found just a moment ago.

'I suppose I must improvise, then. *Stand up.*'

Jack stood, awkwardly. His limbs wanted to obey the compulsion, but they were stiffer than usual, clumsy.

‘Are you wondering why it’s me doing this, and not the Nightmare King? It’s because I have intended you as a *gift*.’

Jack blinked, he heard the words, but they hardly made any sense.

‘Ah, yes, I know. That will work nicely. *Get dressed*,’ August said, and the confusion that came on the back of picking up and pulling on his wet pants was too much. Why would he need clothing? Why did August sound so pleased? What had he thought of?

Jack cried out when the fabric of his sweatshirt touched the raw wounds on his back and front. He drew in breath after ragged breath, forced the pain away, felt a bit more like himself now that he had his hoodie back on, his pants. He walked over to get the locket without thinking, his brain already treated it as a fundamental part of his ensemble. He couldn’t get dressed without it.

August handed it to him, and Jack took it and trembled as he put it back on. He couldn’t predict *anything*. He didn’t know what to brace himself for.

‘Let me go,’ Jack whispered, and August briefly touched his fingertips to the side of Jack’s face.

‘Do you know, I haven’t met anyone this susceptible to the compulsion who wasn’t actually human? Curious. Do you know what I think? I think it shows just how weak you are, Jack Frost. Small, weak, thin, frail. Just a pawn, really.’

August faced him.

‘You know, don’t you? You already understand these things. I’m not telling you anything you haven’t considered, because it rings true inside of you. Jack Frost, who is just as confused as I am, who doesn’t understand why he might be necessary, or why he’s significant, or why anyone pays him any attention. *Stay still*.’

August stepped forwards and brushed the palm of his hand over Jack’s pants, over his flaccid penis. August didn’t seem to be interested in anything more than showing his ownership, his power. Jack jerked hard within the confines of his body, *trapped*.

‘Most people could fight this. It would be hard for them, but they would *try*. Why aren’t you trying?’

‘*I am*,’ Jack said, hating how his voice sounded. He struggled harder inside his own mind, but it wasn’t *working*. He was horrified at the thought that he was somehow unusual, that others would have done better, done *more*.

‘Are you really?’ August said, moving his hand curiously, before dragging it up underneath Jack’s sweatshirt and digging his fingers back into Jack’s wounds. His expression didn’t change when Jack whined in pain. ‘Even pain doesn’t make you step backwards. Fight me, Jack. Do they all just keep you around to make themselves feel better? Are you *moral support*? Do you make a fantastic cheerleader? *What are you planning?*’

Jack’s eyes flew open at the sudden compulsion. He snapped his teeth down so hard around the words that wanted to push out of his mouth that he chipped a tooth at the back of his mouth.

‘So you’ll fight me when it comes to *politics*, but you won’t fight me when it comes to *yourself*? You are a strange one. But that just makes me even more sure of what I’m doing. So, I thank you.’

A splitting pain was boring into the back of Jack’s eyes as he continued to resist the compulsion that August hadn’t yet withdrawn. The plan was the only thing he had left. If he offered up what he

was *planning*, he'd have to start all over again, and he didn't have *time*. He knew he didn't. He knew how weak he was, how frail, how fragile. August wasn't telling him anything he didn't know. The plan was all that mattered, and it wasn't even much of a plan.

'You're going to hurt yourself, if you keep fighting me,' August said, expressionless.

Jack screamed through his teeth as the pressure built inside of his head. He felt a sudden pain in his right eye and his hand flew up to cover it. August removed his hand, calmly, kept it imprisoned in his damp palm.

'Blood vessel burst,' August said.

The pressure kept building. Jack's mind was being eroded of all thought. There was only one thing left that he could hold onto – it was that, or start spilling all the ideas that he'd thought of since the beginning.

He threw his head back.

'*PITCH!*' he shrieked. He knew, he *knew* that there was no Pitch. Having Pitch wasn't possible without a plan, without his hard work, and he hung onto that. The compulsion shook inside of him. It did not break completely, but the pressure in Jack's head abated. He gasped for breath.

'I want you to tell me something,' August said quietly. 'I want you to tell me the things that Pitch used to do, that comforted you.'

Jack's mouth dropped open and his eyes rolled to August in disbelief and confusion.

'*Go on*,' August said. He looked *bored*, face flat except for the tiniest downward turn of his lips.

Jack couldn't fight both compulsions at the same time.

'H-he, he would...put his hands, fingers, through my hair,' Jack said, his voice strained.

Jack flinched when he felt gentle fingers card through his hair, a hand brush over his scalp. It was horribly familiar, and he realised what August was doing, what he would ruin, if he did this.

'Stop it,' Jack choked. '*Stop*.'

'So. Like this, then?' August said, reaching up with his other hand. '*Don't fight me*,' he added, when Jack reached up to claw his arms away.

The hands were impossibly careful. More than he thought possible. A palm cradled his scalp. Fingers untangled his hair, combed it out softly. The gentler August was, the more Jack felt like he was coming apart. He blinked and blinked to clear his vision, and realised he had started to cry.

'He forgets that I have unfinished business with him,' August said quietly. 'So I will make a gift of you to the Nightmare King. And if the Nightmare King remains allied to us, you shall be his toy. But, if...*if* he loses the shadows once more, I am prepared. You shall torment him through the very act of *existing*. You will be both liability and a reminder of all that he could not protect.'

Jack kept whispering the word 'Stop' under his breath, and it made no difference.

'*Tell me another thing Pitch used to do*.'

Jack tried shaking his head, tried to stop himself, but he was still fighting the compulsion to spill his plans to August, and getting Pitch back was more important than the sensation of his self

unravelling.

'He would, he would touch my face,' Jack said, cringing, remembering the times when Pitch anchored him to the present by stroking fingers over his forehead, curling a palm around his cheek. Even when Jack had slept against him on the armchair, he had been aware of a hand that would sometimes come up and turn, so that the backs of his fingers would caress his cheek until he sank deeply back into sleep.

One of August's hands slipped slowly out of Jack's hair, and mimicked the gesture. It was the first display of physical comfort he had received since Pitch had been possessed, and he hadn't *wanted* it even from loved ones, and he couldn't handle it now. He hadn't wanted to experience it again until Pitch was back, until *Pitch* could give it to him first. He didn't deserve it until then, he knew. August was breaking him down, not with force, but with gentleness.

He felt like he was shaking so badly that the ground itself was rumbling.

The dim, murky water behind the dome was lit with a flash of bright light.

Jack shrieked, startled, and August only trailed fingertips down his cheek, over closed eyelids, smearing tears down his face.

'Focus, Jack. I'm rarely this kind to anyone.'

'You're not being kind *now*,' Jack sobbed.

'I think we have time for one more,' August said, looking sideways, and Jack realised that the ground *was* trembling beneath his feet. '*One more thing that Pitch did that you liked, then, Jack.*'

'After...bad dreams,' Jack felt faint, he was sweating heavily now, warmer than he could remember feeling for a long time. The comfort of coolness and frost seemed like a distant memory. Everything was humid, muggy, cloying, too much.

'He'd comfort you after nightmares? Like a *child*?' August chuckled. 'I imagine this is quite the nightmare for you, right now, isn't it, Jack? This one will be easy. Shh, shh, dear boy, it's okay now. I'm here. I'm here.'

Jack's mouth opened on sobs he couldn't repress any longer. His knees buckled and he fell heavily to the ground, and August lowered himself alongside him, gathering him into his arms. He stared blankly ahead as the ground moved beneath him. He was nauseated, spots drifted in his vision.

'Do you feel that?' August said, looking up. 'That's the cavalry, thinking that they got here in time. But, Jack, I've never needed that long with my targets. And,' he chuckled indulgently, 'I certainly didn't need long with you. Have you been dreaming of how he would reassure you, when he returned to you? I'm afraid I've made things terribly complicated for you.'

Jack pushed hands up to cover his face, knowing that everything August said was true. Knowing what August was doing, knowing what his intentions were, didn't mean that Jack could switch off how it was affecting him. And August knew that too, twisting up his memories of Pitch, poking at the vulnerable places inside of him.

Three more flashes of light in quick succession, and August sighed out a low hum. He paused in his languid strokes of Jack's hair.

'Lightning. Gwyn is *quite* angry. I suppose I should send you back. I wish we had longer, but I think this is adequate, don't you? Maybe now everyone else will see you for the pathetic wretch



that you are.'

August withdrew from Jack and handed him his staff as though it was of no importance to him. Jack stared at it, numb, dazed, chest heaving with silent, confused motions.

'I always intended to give it back,' August whispered, as he opened Jack's palm for him, and closed his fingers over the wood with its shiny, transparent coating. 'I think you're going to need it. You're looking a tad peaky. I do hope I haven't given you long-term injury, making you discharge your power like that.'

'I *hate* you,' Jack managed on a wet, shaken voice. 'You will be-'

August looked up as a flash of lightning hit the dome and crawled along it. A small hole opened, and water started streaming in. August quickly grasped Jack by the chin.

'*Look at me.*'

Jack did.

'*Jack Frost, I order you to tell the Nightmare King, in whatever incarnation you may find him, of this encounter. So that he may respond however he sees fit.*'

The compulsion was so strong that Jack stumbled towards the dome, determined to fulfil it. He burst through the barrier just as the dome collapsed on itself, catching him briefly in the current. He struck up through the dark water weakly, wishing he could use ice to force his way to the top of the lake. It was imperative that he get to the Nightmare King as quickly as possible. Nothing else mattered. He kicked up hard with his legs and the pain in his body, the ache of it, seemed a distant concern.

Jack struggled when hands grasped him as he reached the surface. He kicked blindly as he was dragged out onto the snowy shore, gasping at how cold the ground was beneath him. He struck out with his staff, heard sounds of dissent and concern and didn't understand any of them. He had to get on the winds and he had to get to the Nightmare King. The winds would tell him where he was, they could track anything.

'...he's compelled,' someone said, and someone else answered.

Jack felt two arms lock around his shoulders, and as he twisted, two callused hands held his head still. He heard words that shaped themselves into an apology. He braced to twist out of the grip that was holding him but he was too weak, he couldn't move.

Light burst into his skull. It blistered through his mind, poured out through the backs of his eyes, rayed out of his mouth and ears. It tore through every compulsion that had been pushed into him, leaving them present but dormant. The light was excruciating.

Just as quickly, the light faded into nothing, leaving Jack in the horribly dim presence of his own mind. He blinked, dizzy.

He looked up and saw Gwyn leaning over him, withdrawing the hands he'd used to hold Jack's head still. He had a horribly grim expression on his face.

'Are you alright? What did he do?'

'He's been bitten,' another soldier said, lifting Jack's sweatshirt. 'All the way around it looks like.'

‘We’ll get that cleaned, why is there so much blood at the back? Show me.’

Jack was still gathering his breath, still clearing the light from his eyes. He felt his body twisted onto its side. Gwyn swore, but didn’t ask any questions. The bite wound on his back hardly mattered now. It hurt, but pain seemed like something he’d always had to live with. It didn’t bother him as much as the fatigue, as the heat that rocketed through his body. The snow beneath him made him sore, it was too cold, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so cold. His teeth chattered.

‘H-he wants to use me,’ Jack managed, trying to clear his mind and failing. ‘B-bait. Wanted me to t-tell Nightmare King that h-he...’ Jack remembered the weight of Augus in his mouth, the taste of him, and turned to the side, gagging hard. He forced himself to continue. ‘If-If we save P-Pitch, he w-wants Pitch to know, if we bring him back. Wants...to hurt us, by-’

‘Hurting you. I can guess how,’ Gwyn finished for him, standing up and turning away from Jack. A moment later he slammed his sword into the ground as hard as he could. Jack wanted to apologise, but he didn’t know how to shape the words.

Gwyn turned back after a few breaths and knelt by Jack’s side again.

‘Did he make you talk about the weapons?’

‘H-he tried,’ Jack said. ‘I...it was the only thing, the only thing I could h-hold back.’

Gwyn’s face twisted up so quickly that if Jack blinked he would have missed the expression.

‘I hate to say it, Jack, but you’ve come up with some of the better ideas so far. If he hasn’t discovered what we are doing so far, we have to protect the details. The Nightmare King can’t find out about this encounter, the specifics of it. He will use it against you. Against *us*.’

Jack hiccupped on a hysterical laugh.

‘Y-yeah. Think I d-don’t know that?’

‘Gwyn,’ one of his soldiers pointed to the lake. ‘Gwyn, what do you want us to do?’

Jack tried to lever himself up to his elbows but he was too weak. The soldier that was crouched by his back helpfully pushed him upright. Jack made a thin sound at what the other soldier had pointed at. His legs came up and started pushing his body backwards automatically.

Augus was standing on the shoreline, smiling.

Gwyn’s grip tightened on his sword and he slid it out of the ground. But before he could take two steps forward, Jack found some hidden reservoir. Some missed well of outrage that he didn’t know he had inside of him. He couldn’t bear it. Augus just standing there, like nothing had happened. *Smirking*.

He pushed himself upright, lurched forwards, holding his staff out.

‘*You didn’t break me!*’ Jack yelled, jerking away from Gwyn, who had grabbed his arm to hold him back. The energy that he’d found was already disappearing, was nothing more than a burst of rage. Augus smiled wider. ‘You- You didn’t-’

Jack was caught by another soldier as he collapsed.

Gwyn charged off in Augus' direction, but it was too late. The Each Uisge literally melted into the water, and disappeared without a ripple. Jack sagged as his body stopped listening to him. His flesh was so unresponsive he almost felt like he was under a compulsion again.

'I don't feel very well,' Jack said, his voice weak. 'I don't...'

Gwyn came back immediately and Jack wished they would stop laying him down on the snow, it was just too *cold*.

'I don't understand,' Jack said faintly. 'Why is the snow so cold?'

He caught sight of Gwyn's eyes widening in alarm, just before he passed out.

## Chapter End Notes

\*hides\*

\*

In our next chapter, 'A Hungry Little Girl,' Jack decides that desperate times call for desperate measures. But this desperate?

# A Hungry Little Girl

## Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all of your comments, kudos, bookmarks and subscriptions. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack came back to himself slowly. First, a memory of light. Then a throbbing ache throughout his whole body. He felt he'd been pulled through a very small knothole, and he didn't like it. His eye hurt. He had a headache. What had happened? He murmured when he realised that he was being held down by a mass of something covering his body. He blinked awake and Gwyn was leaning over him, curly head blocking out the sun, causing his hair to glow.

*Typical. Wait, why is Gwyn here?*

Remembrance was a swell of cold nausea that pushed away anything comfortable. He gasped. He wanted to sit up, throw up, run, *anything*, but Gwyn was already holding his hands out prohibitively.

'Hold on, don't move yet. You collapsed. How's your body temperature? Does the snow still feel too cold?'

'What are you even talking about? Snow feeling too *cold*?' Jack's voice was wrecked, *again*. He sounded like he had when the Nain Rouge had taken a part of his soul. He lifted his head up and looked down at himself, only to realise that he was buried into snow up to his neck.

'Where'd, where's...are we safe?' Jack said, finding it hard to bring himself to say August's name out loud. Gwyn nodded curtly.

'He's probably back in Scotland by now. The Each Uisge can teleport through fresh water. You're looking a bit better. Have your powers returned?'

Jack raised his arm through the snow slowly and turned his hand palm upwards. A small spiral of frost danced before sinking downwards around him. He was so tired. He couldn't remember the last time he'd needed sleep so badly. Unconsciousness wasn't rest, and his body knew it. At least the snow felt normal again. He remembered, vaguely, how uncomfortable it had felt earlier.

'August depleting your powers like that, when you are already ill- Let's just say that I'm glad you woke up again.'

'That's cheerful,' Jack said and pushed himself up, wincing as the wounds in his side flared. Gwyn moved backwards to give him space, and Jack was grateful. He didn't think he could handle someone helping him upright, touching him. He didn't really want to think about why.

'You're getting weaker. Overall,' Gwyn said quietly.

'Yeah, tell me about it. You're doing a really good job of trying not to tell me that you think I'm dying.'

'I assumed it wouldn't help, stating the obvious like that,' Gwyn said.

Jack looked around, the other soldiers were nearby, but not in earshot. At some point he'd been moved away from the lake, he couldn't see or even smell it; but he was still in the forest. The snow was much deeper here.

He felt numb again. Even the pain didn't matter so much. He rubbed a hand over his face and tried to concentrate. He could still feel the compulsions in his mind, broken pieces of paper holding a message that he wanted to see more clearly. He resisted the urge to piece it all back together again, hoped they would fade soon. There was something of Augus on every single one, and it made him want to scour out his brain.

'Will the compulsions stay broken?' Jack asked. Gwyn settled down onto the snow, crossed his legs.

'The longer you can resist them, the less chance they have of reforming.'

Jack nodded. He became aware that he probably wasn't reacting to what had happened to him, the way he thought he would. The Nain Rouge's attack had left him hysterical. Mora's feeding frenzy nightmare had left him incoherent and sobbing. What Augus had done had been worse, and yet he felt little. He stared down at the snow, hoped this might mean he'd recover quickly from the ordeal.

He swallowed and his fingers came up and touched the necklace. He hadn't expected to get it back. He was glad he had. His palm closed around the locket.

'You're still in shock,' Gwyn said, and Jack shook his head.

'I'm good, I think.' He pushed himself upright and the snow obeyed him and loosened, despite having been packed so tightly. He reached out absently for his staff, saw that it had been lain alongside him. He hadn't expected to get that back either. He stood up and braced himself briefly on his staff. He felt shaky, but his legs were holding his weight.

'Your wounds still need to be dressed. And...you'll need to find a change of clothes.'

Jack looked down and sighed when he saw the bloodstains. They spread extensively across his front, down his side, down his pants. He looked a mess.

'Augus is making this personal,' Gwyn said pensively.

'Well, Pitch told me that the Nightmare King and...you know, went steady for a while, or something. And *he*, he talked about making me a present, a gift, for the Nightmare King?'

Gwyn shifted, grated out a sound that was rich with disgust.

'I have fae dying in my Court, *right now*, and he wants to make this about petty grievances?'

'He ordered me to tell the Nightmare King. About what he did. That's...I mean that was when, I think he only let me go, because of that. What did you do to me? When you broke the compulsions? What was that?'

'Light,' Gwyn said, and then seemed to realise that his answer was unhelpful. 'I put a pretty big shock through you, to be honest.'

'You mean, like electricity?'

'Yes, like electricity. My light isn't like Pitch's light. It's not...a golden, good-natured force. It's

neutral – so it's not effective against the shadows – and it's extremely strong. I don't use it often. But it works, and I needed it, so I used it. You might have a headache for some time.'

Jack remembered how bright the explosions of light had been behind August's underwater dome. At the time, he'd hardly noticed, but it seemed like he'd remembered more than he knew, because he could see it clearly now. Gwyn had stayed above the surface of the lake the entire time, and Jack frowned when he realised how far down the light had to penetrate to be that strong. He'd made the ground shake with it.

'Jack,' Gwyn said, uncomfortably. He paused, looked like he was about to ask something difficult and personal, and then his face twisted like he'd changed his mind, 'are you sure you didn't tell August about the weapons? The sword?'

'It was weird,' Jack said, 'It was like the *only* thing I could actually resist. It's not like we even have much of a plan at this point.' Jack shook his head slowly, gingerly around the headache, and he laughed. 'I mean what, some weapons we haven't properly tested, and a really *sparkly* staff, an axe that Pitch is going to hate, and arrows for three bows that I've never actually seen you use. We're doing *great*.'

'This?' Gwyn said, eyes opening in shock and then narrowing into a glare. 'This cynicism? *This* – in part – may not be exactly what he was aiming for, but is certainly a part of his influence, and would be an outcome he'd appreciate. You have a goal, I happen to have respect for that goal. Master yourself, because I don't have the patience or the skill to carry you through this, and we don't have the *time* for you to fall apart.'

Jack took a short step backwards. He'd expected a lot of things, but a lecture hadn't been one of them. Gwyn watched him with a hard expression on his face, and then he looked to the side, abashed.

'It's quick, isn't it? How quickly I become a liability?' Jack repeated the words that were told to him, and Gwyn didn't respond. Jack felt ashamed, embarrassed of his outburst. He knew Gwyn was right. They just didn't have the time.

'I don't even know if we have weeks,' Jack said, and Gwyn looked at him in surprise. 'I thought I had maybe a few months, before today. Maybe a few weeks if things got bad. I didn't want to tell you. Or anyone. I might be wrong. But I feel it, you know? All the time. Like...like if I closed my eyes and wanted it, it could be tomorrow, or the next day maybe. I could just want it, and it would happen. So I'm going to stay focused, I *have* to. I just think maybe we don't have long. Like...I don't want to estimate but I don't think I have long. I think I'm running on a really tight deadline now.'

Silence stretched out between them both. Jack looked over at the other soldiers again. Most of them were focused on standing watch. Two had drifted closer towards each other and were having a serious conversation about something he couldn't hear. He could smell the sweet odour of clean snow all around them. The lighter tree branches were bowed with it. It absorbed sound, reflected light. On another day, it would have been a cause for joy and mischief.

He thought of Pitch, trapped in that mess of darkness. He thought of himself, trapped in his own, sore, tired body. If he could just make sure that *one* of them got out of this mess intact, alive, recovering, he'd take it. He'd decided that days ago.

'Gwyn, why would A-Augus order me to tell the Nightmare King about what happened, if the Nightmare King can read my fears anyway?'

Gwyn sighed, he raised his leg idly and compacted the snow beneath his foot by compressing it, a disgruntled look pressing itself into his face, turning his features harshly angular.

‘Amusement. You did mention, before you passed out, that August had mentioned using you as a gift. The compulsion would have left you practically gift-wrapped. And it still might, if it activates again.’

‘Sooo, if we don’t want him finding out- Or if we want it to seem like I’m not bothered by what happened, we’re going to need to find a way to block him from reading my fears, aren’t we?’

Jack realised what he had to do. He knew who he had to visit, and who he had to wrangle for information. And in a rush, he knew that Gwyn would never allow it. Would never agree. Wouldn’t, in a million years, think that it was a good idea.

He called up the winds with a sweep of his staff and staggered onto them. He was glad that the wind picked him up as it always had. He was starting to envy those who could teleport with light or shadows or water or snow-globes or tunnels in the ground.

‘You’ll be okay without me, right? You don’t need me to actually test the weapons?’

‘Jack, what are you doing?’ Gwyn said, eyes widening in alarm. Jack drifted backwards on the winds rapidly. He didn’t have time to change his clothing. His wounds were bad, but they were manageable. It would just have to do.

‘I just remembered something, okay? I’ll be back soon.’ Jack flew up out of reach as Gwyn stepped forward.

‘*Soon?*’

*Yep, Gwyn is definitely not going to understand.*

‘Yeah, like a day? Two maybe? Don’t panic, okay?’

Jack let the winds sweep him high into the sky, hoping he had enough energy for the flight, enough energy to defend himself, enough left to do what he had to do.

He heard Gwyn’s shouts – angry, then panicked – from a very great distance.

The last thing he heard was Gwyn shouting, ‘It’s not *safe!*’

Jack laughed under his breath, amused.

He didn’t even know what safe meant anymore.

\*

Whether it was the frigid air temperatures up in the atmosphere, or the slow rebuilding of his resolve, Jack wasn’t as weak as he expected to be when he touched down in Detroit at an abandoned, graffiti-covered multi-storey car-park. The concrete monstrosity reached deep into the bowels of the ground, and it stunk of refuse and decay. Jack had tracked that scent as soon as he’d reached North America and it hadn’t been hard to narrow it down and find it. He almost thought the wind was offended he’d even asked.

He landed clumsily, catching himself with his staff.

Once he would have been terrified to behold this place. Now he flew slowly and warily into the

gloom, eyes adjusting easily. He touched the scar at his throat, and then his fingers drifted down to wrap briefly around the locket. What was it that Gwyn had once said? He wasn't going to throw any tool out of the toolbox? Jack was starting to understand why Gwyn's attitudes were shaped the way they were. It was strange to think that he had once resented him for it.

Being in the Nain Rouge's lair, knowing that the stench of her was still strong – meaning she hadn't vacated since the aftermath of the battle – left him cautious, but strangely unafraid. Perhaps because there wasn't much more she could do to him now. He was already dying. She had been stripped of her powers by the Nightmare King, she had been demoted by August. He would, however, have to keep an eye out for her guns. He stayed airborne, ready to leave at a moment's notice.

He hoped she was in a listening mood.

He sank lower through the levels, until all natural light had vanished and the decaying concrete was lit with illegally acquired electricity. The fluorescent lights cast old blood-stains on the walls, pillars and floors into sharp relief. He saw the bodies of rats – at first intermittently, and then increasingly. There were fox pelts, the uncured, crumpled skins of cats and dogs, even a rabbit. As he continued, he saw a sudden scatter of bullet casings on the ground, gleaming brightly in the unforgiving light.

On the lowest level, the reek rose so sharply that he placed his hand over his mouth and nose, swallowing hard.

Several of the fluorescent lights had been smashed out. In some sections, the light flickered and hummed, threatening to cast whole sections into blackness at any moment. Jack had seen children and teenagers play video games that looked like this. For the first time since arriving he felt a tiny glitter of fear, a shard that grew inside of him.

He looked around constantly, and then he heard a sound. An awful sound. A wet, persistent *chewing*. Jack shuddered, made a noise. The hollow wound in his back flared with a loud, sharp stab of pain and he had to stop. Almost as quickly, the pain disappeared, like a stone dropped into water. Jack understood then that he was in an incredible amount of pain, he was just disconnected from it. He was glad for that, because that momentary, realistic burst of pain would have left him without the ability to act if it was constantly aware of it.

'Jesus Christ,' the Nain Rouge rasped from where she sat, leaning against the wall. She pulled the rat carcass away from her mouth and wiped gore off her lips with the back of her hand. Jack looked away. 'You are weak as *shit*. Did they fucking demote you? Can your posse even do that? Rough call, man. Rat? There's plenty down here.'

'No thanks,' Jack murmured and the Nain Rouge laughed.

'Suit yourself. They're so stupid, like all mammals. They come down 'cuz of the smell, and then I eat them, and then the rest come down to feast on the skins of their brethren. And then I eat *them*. I'm so fucking sustainable, whatever board deals with that environmental nonsense should hire *me*. It'd be so dope.'

Jack looked at the floor around her. He couldn't see any guns. But she could easily have been hiding them in the rank skins attached to her body.

'How weak are you?' Jack said, and the Nain Rouge squeezed blood from the rat into her mouth, licking at her broken teeth in relish.



‘These fae,’ she ground out, avoiding his question, ‘they’re such babies. Fuck. August is only what, two, three thousand years old? It’s just *sad*, these young things ruling the Courts. What a bunch of cunts.’

Jack’s heart stuttered in his chest. He had assumed that because of her appearance, because of the way she spoke, and acted...

‘Oh yeah, idiot,’ she said, ‘that’s it. You don’t even want to *know* how old I am. And you know, you *stink*. You smell like waterhorse and your own blood and it’s just, beneath all that, I know you don’t have much frost left, but...’

The Nain Rouge slowly dragged herself to her feet in a series of jagged movements.

‘I bet you still taste *sweet*, Frosty.’

He flew backwards quickly, ready to flee, and her giggle was a high-pitched sound at odds with her normally deeper voice.

‘Bitch, I can’t even suck souls out of *humans*. Chillax. I got your number. What the fuck do you want?’

Jack left a good amount of space between them. It was obvious that the Nain Rouge didn’t radiate the same amount of power that she used to. But he could tell she was still dangerous. Her opaque, dark red eyes still saw too much.

‘That scarf,’ Jack said, ‘the scarf that the Nightmare King ripped off you, the one that was blocking your fears. I need one, and you’re going to tell me where you got it.’

He pointed his staff threateningly, and the Nain Rouge held her hands up in mock fear.

‘Oh *no*! The weak as *shit*, itty-bitty frost spirit is gonna make me feel cold. Stop the presses. You can’t kill me, I’m exempt from the fae class code, didja know? Even demoted, I don’t die. I just bide my time. I rise and I fall. I sleep dormant in the dark and then I *return*.’

There was something profound about her voice, prophetic and hypnotic and true. He knew with an intense certainty that she was an ancient spirit who had lived through many incarnations, truly immortal, cycling between famine and feast, gorging herself on the world until defeated, temporarily, by the survivors.

‘What’ll you give me, in exchange?’ she said, ‘I could probably feed on your frost if you gave it me voluntarily. With a cherry on top.’

‘Maybe something better,’ Jack said, his heart pounding. ‘I’m going to take down the Nightmare King. Tell me that doesn’t appeal to you.’

The Nain Rouge tilted her head at him, scratched a piece of dead animal off her cheek with sharp nails.

‘Fuck me,’ she said, ‘You’re serious, aren’t’cha? Not so much fun anymore, huh? How’s that workin’ out for you? I can smell him on you, you know. August. I bet he fucked you six ways from Sunday. You’re *still* bleeding.’

Jack ground his teeth together, his hand tightened on his staff. She was wrong, but the fact that she could tell that something had happened at all, was taunting him about it, made him want to freeze her to death. She had killed a *child*. She had killed many children, in all likelihood. No one would

blame him if he took action against her, he knew that.

‘You seem like the kind of fae who would want revenge against the one who took you down,’ Jack said evenly. ‘You help me, and I promise you, I will destroy the Nightmare King. And...and if I don’t...’ *I’ll come back, and you can have whatever measure of frost is left to me.*

‘Go on,’ the Nain Rouge said, ‘*Say it.*’

‘No,’ Jack said, his lips thinning. ‘The revenge is going to have to be enough.’

‘Whatevs,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘Normally, I’d tell you to go fuck yourself, but you got a look about you. And I hate that asshole. Before he crash-landed my fucking party, it was *me*. I was the one who owned the fears of this world. And you tell me you’re gonna get rid of those alien shadows that don’t belong? I’ll consider anything. Jesus, I’m fucking desperate.’

The Nain Rouge laughed self-deprecatingly, and then considered Jack, narrowing her eyes.

‘The more you know, huh? You ignorant shit. Children these days don’t know a fucking *thing*. But this world will know me again like they once did. You get rid of those shadows, *baby*, and then – if you survive it – you can fucking wait for me to catch up and take over. You guys. You children of *hope* and *growth* and *love*, what a war you’re constantly waging against us. Aren’t you tired? Don’t you feel it in your bones? Don’t you want to sleep? But oh, not little Frosty, not possibly, he *can’t*. He’s so *determined*.’

‘You talk a lot,’ Jack said, the lacerations in his throat from screaming making his voice deeper, angrier.

‘Yeah, guess how many visitors I get?’

‘As many as you’ve earned, probably.’

The Nain Rouge pounced sideways and Jack winced when he heard the crunch of a rat skeleton. She stood up again, turning it belly upwards. She grinned at Jack, and didn’t look away as she sunk her teeth deep into its flesh. Jack’s stomach heaved. He saw her grin wider, bloody, around her food.

‘I like you more,’ she said, around the raw meat, ‘when you’re not being babysat by all the goody two-shoes. You should visit again some time. Of course, you’ll be dead by then. But you know that.’

‘You did this to me,’ Jack said, jaw clenching.

‘And you’ve held out *way* longer than I thought you would, hey. You should be fucking *grateful*. I hunted all over the fucking shop, looking for you in order to finish the job until August *told* me not to. I don’t like to leave my work unfinished. I would’ve given you the quickest goddamned death. But *no*, you do this to yourself, holding out. You strong fucker. I think you could actually do it.’

Jack was almost certain she was playing him. August had said the *opposite*, had not only told him of his weakness, but demonstrated it time and time again. Here was the Nain Rouge, saying that he was strong. There was nothing strong about how quickly he’d been taken down by those compulsions. *Nothing*.

‘Makara,’ the Nain Rouge announced it abruptly. ‘Hindu vahana. Old as *balls*. He’s like me, one of the old ones, and you’d better watch your fucking back around him, because he scares the *shit* out of me, and just take a moment to turn that one over. But for a price, he’ll make you one of his

scarves, and it'll block whatever fears you want blocked. You're gonna love this though, he's Unseelie.'

Jack groaned, he resisted dragging his hand through his hair. He was so done with Unseelie fae.

'He'll look monstrous as all get out. Mostly looks like a crocodile that got giant, and trapped, and deformed. My favourite kind of monster. His appearance changes for everyone, but he mostly just looks like some nightmare a demon thought up. Which...not so far from the truth. Even if you can pay his price? He might not do the work. He's fickle as shit.'

'So like you then,' Jack said, tiredly, and the Nain Rouge shook her head as she ripped up a piece of flesh from the rat and swallowed it whole. She closed her eyes happily, Jack winced.

'I pay my dues. And don't you worry your pretty head about me, Frosty, rats taste fucking wonderful. It's not such a bad life for me down here, biding my time, building my strength, waiting for the *rise*.'

'Where can I find Makara?'

'Well he's the vahana of the fucking Ganges, you grade A moron. So that's where. What are they even teaching you shits in class these days? But the Ganges, that's pretty far. You think you can make a trip like that? Cuz I think you're gonna need some help.'

The Nain Rouge stomped hard on the ground and a bottomless, reeking tunnel opened up in front of her. Jack stared at it in horror. He could see shards of bone and sinew sticking out from the dirt within the tunnel as he looked down into the gloom. It was disgusting. It looked like a pit into the depths of hell.

*What is it with these fae and teleporting?*

'I don't trust you,' Jack said, the Nain Rouge nodded vigorously.

'Don't give the most royal of fucks. You can go to a fucking library, look that shit up on the internet if you don't believe me. Nothing's bloody sacred anymore. You wanna find a fae, it'll be there. That's what I love about this world. Everyone shits all over it. That's my jam.'

'That's obviously a trap,' Jack said, pointing at the tunnel.

'If you'd ever bothered to learn anything about *anything*, you'd know that one thing – *one thing* – matters more to me than food. And that's taking down the motherfucker who stops me from being able to *eat*. And you aint got the time to go to a library and look it up and then fly there. You can't pretend around me. I can see how much you've got left. I look at people and see a fuel gauge, and you are running on just about empty.'

Jack looked back at the tunnel leading into the black. It looked like a deformed version of one of Bunnymund's burrows, and it could lead *anywhere*.

But Jack didn't know what else to do. He didn't want the Nightmare King to find out about what had happened, he was sure he didn't want the Nightmare King to know why he was frightened of Augus. Even through the numbness, he didn't think he could handle a monster with Pitch's face teasing him about it. He might not be able to trust the Nain Rouge's motives, but he was almost certain that she wanted the Nightmare King gone.

He was so busy considering his options, tiredly sorting through possibilities, that he missed the attack until it was too late.

The Nain Rouge sprang at him with that same whip-sharp snap that she'd unleashed on the rat. She powered him down to the ground, one hand on his throat, her teeth bared. Her fingers dug in, and he snarled back at her, bringing his staff up and over and hitting her as hard as he could. It didn't shake her, but her eyes widened in shock as he raised it up and brought it down again. He could feel a faint, weak tugging at the power inside of him, responding to whatever she was doing with the centre of her palm at his throat. But her tugging hunger wasn't strong enough to bring his frost up, let alone draw it out of him. He kicked up hard and punched her in the side of the neck. It was a poor punch, but he'd angled his knuckles so well it didn't matter.

She rolled off him, gasping and laughing, as he staggered backwards, rubbing at his throat.

'Whatevs,' she said, crouched on the floor. 'Can't blame a kid for trying, right?'

Jack was breathing heavily, hand clenching and unclenching on his staff.

'You're not a *kid*,' Jack growled.

'Yeah. Got that right,' she said, pushing herself upright. She swayed slightly, as though the effort to try and draw up his frost had drained her. She blinked slowly, and then grinned malice in his direction. 'If by some miracle you make it out of this alive, you better enjoy whatever hundreds of years you got left, Frosty. They're gonna go by *fast*. The *first thing* I'm coming for when I'm stronger is you. Bitch.'

Jack's vision flashed white as anger exploded through him. He charged her with his staff, pushed at her chest until she'd stumbled backwards and hit the ground. He raised the crook of his staff to her neck and shoved it down, hard, grimacing when she made a choking noise. He sent frost down the wood threateningly, watched as frost spirals started to creep over her skin. She stiffened, but a moment later she looked up at him and actually *smiled*.

Jack heaved for breath, furious. He ground the staff down, pleased when her smile faltered.

'You all seem to think that the only thing I've done for the past three hundred years is *frolic*. You *all* seem to think that messing with me is a great idea! You *murdered* a young child! Her name was *Stacey*! You didn't even know her name, and I *know* you don't care. But do you know what I've done? Do you know what I do to humans who have murdered young children? Just because you're immortal doesn't mean I can't try and see if there's some loophole.'

The Nain Rouge wheezed with laughter, then she brushed away the staff as though it was nothing more than a small stick. She pushed herself into a sitting position, then stood once more. She rubbed at her neck, removing flakes of frost, wincing.

'You got *dark*,' she laughed. 'It's almost as though August *did* possess you with those stupid shadows.'

'I might be weak,' Jack said, ignoring the ridiculousness of her statement, 'but I can still grow an icicle into the centre of your neck, and then we can see how *you* like it.'

'Yeah? Well? Maybe we'll have a fucking rematch one day. Winner takes all. Etcetera. Now, in the meantime, be a good boy, go see the vahana of the Ganges. You're giving me a fucking migraine.'

The Nain Rouge stamped her foot again, and Jack's shout was lost as he fell through the vacuum of the fetid tunnel that opened underneath his feet.

He landed heavily, his arm slammed into his ribs underneath him as he hit the ground face down. His staff landed nearby. The pain in his body became ineloquent, turned his vision grey and white for a few seconds. Even before his eyes cleared, he forced his arms and legs under himself. He couldn't get much further, his body quaking in plain refusal.

Something about the Nain Rouge's chosen method of transport was as difficult to deal with as being teleported through Pitch's shadows. It had skimmed some of his energy, and he didn't have much of it left to skim.

Jack lifted his head to survey his surroundings, praying he hadn't just been dropped off into the middle of the Unseelie Court (though he doubted it, the smells here were...unique). He was underground, in some immense corridor surrounded by carvings. He caught sight of elaborate, huge monsters shaped into the pale stone walls – peacocks with elephant heads, crocodiles with the antlers of stags. It was humid, and he caught sight of a giant underground lake and shuddered to see the expanse of still water. He'd landed on stone, behind a pillar that had been carved into fanged elephants with vengeful eyes.

He heard an unearthly growl. It shook the whole structure. It was the sound an animal would make if it were the size of a multi-storey building, and it was not a happy sound. It vibrated through Jack's body with menace.

*Shit, not good. Get up.*

Jack pushed with all his strength and his muscles refused to obey. Worse, fatigue forced him to lower himself to the ground slowly. Pain rocketed through him.

*Get up, get up, get up!*

He froze when he heard the soft, sliding footsteps of bare feet on carved slabs of stone. A swishing sound, as though fabric was moving over the stone with every step. He tilted his head, far more frightened than he'd been when he'd visited the Nain Rouge. He hoped he hadn't just wasted the last of his energy, that he wasn't about to fall asleep and never wake up again in the lair of some Unseelie fae, under the Ganges.

A middle-aged man stepped past the pillar, dark-skinned, nude except for golden braces around his forearms and a golden crown that encircled his head, complete with a short, raised elephant's trunk, and mellifluous tusks. Sprouting from his back was a huge peacock's tail that gleamed blue and green, the eyes on the long tail feathers refracting light, gleaming with all the colours of the spectrum. The tail hung low and heavy, like any peacock's train, and brushed the ground constantly, shifting with every step. He held a pitcher of water, a glass and a platter of grapes. There was a calm, curious look in his eyes as he glanced at Jack, kneeling down beside him and placing the water and grapes by his side.

Jack wondered if this was one of Makara's servants. He tried to lever himself upright, but failed, vision swimming. He was going to pass out, *again*.

'Drink,' the man said, his voice deep and aged. He poured a small amount of water into the glass and held it to Jack's lips.

'No, I-'

'Trust me. Drink,' the man said. His voice was reassuring, but there was a firm light in his murky, green eyes. Jack could sense something of glamour in them, but it was an old, stable glamour, it didn't jar Jack at all to look at it. Jack opened his mouth automatically, swallowing a sip of the

cool, clean water.

The man plucked a single grape from the bunch and held it out.

‘Eat.’

‘I don’t need to eat,’ Jack said, vision blurring.

‘One grape won’t hurt you. They’re good. I grew these myself. Just one, the sugar will help.’

Jack managed, with a herculean effort, to reach up and take the grape from the man’s fingers between his shaking fingers, and then – before eating it – paused.

‘Can you, can you let Makara know I’m here, please?’ Jack said, then – not wanting to seem rude – split the grape between his teeth, surprised at how flavourful it was. Of all the things he imagined he’d be doing less than two hours after his encounter with August, it was not having refreshments in India, with an unselfconscious, nude man with the most spectacular peacock tail he’d ever seen.

The man smiled broadly.

‘I am Makara,’ the man said. Jack blinked. After the Nain Rouge’s warning, after seeing all the monsters carved all over the walls, after hearing that immense, menacing *growl*, he hadn’t expected *this*. This was the home of a monster, it was an underground corridor large enough to house a gigantic beast. That wasn’t what he was seeing at all. He thought he’d made a mistake. He tried to tell himself it could be a trick, but his mind was refusing to cooperate. He had no energy left even for suspicion. ‘And you need to sleep. Now.’

‘No, I have to ask you something, I have to-’

‘I know what you want to ask me,’ Makara said softly, picking two more grapes off the bunch and eating them himself. ‘I can see past all illusion, into the hearts of everything and everyone. There is no secret you can keep from me. I know what you know, I know more than what you know. You need not ask, I will make the scarf for you. I know what you need. I will work on it while you sleep.’

‘I *can’t* sleep,’ Jack said, embarrassed when his eyes started to water in frustration. ‘I might not-’

‘Yes, you will. You will wake up again. And you will feel better for the sleep.’

‘No, you don’t understand,’ Jack said, groaning as dizziness swamped him and his arm buckled beneath him.

‘I promise you, you will wake up again.’

‘I can’t sleep here, Gwyn-’

‘I will let the young Lord of the Seelie Court know you are here. I will do that right away. You will not die, young one. You need the sleep. You know what I say is right. You know even as I say it, that your body will not give you a choice. So put your mind to rest, I will help you. You do not understand yet, I can see your doubts in your mind. You are too tired to know that what I say is true. I see all there is to know about you, and so, there is nothing you need ask me. The scarf will take some time. This is a complicated procedure, especially when it must be so delicately addressed. There is nothing else for you to do but sleep.’

Makara’s voice was powerful, his words alone made Jack’s breathing slow down and deepen,

made his muscles start to relax. The Nain Rouge hadn't been lying, he radiated ancient awareness, an epic power. There was some part of him that trusted Makara already, that believed him, even though Makara was Unseelie. The more Makara looked into his own mind, the more he could see the shape of Makara, and found him trustworthy. He could taste the sweet tartness that the grape had left behind in his mouth. He had no choice, he *had* to sleep.

'There, you are doing remarkably well. And you really will feel better for it when you awaken. I know these things. There is nothing you know that I cannot help but know.'

Jack felt his consciousness leave him slowly, pouring away. Makara hummed happily.

'When you awaken, we shall discuss the matter of price.'

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Unexpected Inspiration,' Jack may have cause to learn that not all Unseelie fae are the living worst. Also, North and Sandy have a present for our frost spirit, one that Jack's been waiting for such a long time to receive.

# Unexpected Inspiration

## Chapter Notes

I will never cease to be amazed and grateful for all the feedback, kudos, bookmarks and so on. You guys are fantastic, honestly. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack's dream was a mess. Juxtaposed images and feelings flashed into his mind one after the other, clamoured for attention. Some shattered under the weight of others, but there were always new scenes replacing old ones. He was overwhelmed. He felt water filling his lungs and his dream-self swelled with horror. His mouth was forced open, something was pushing into it, and he screamed, spraying lake water everywhere.

He awoke to paroxysms of coughing, his lungs and throat working to clear room for the water that kept coming. It burnt his throat, scalded his mouth. But as the seconds passed, he realised that he wasn't hearing the sound of water hitting the ground, and that the sensations were phantoms. Shaking, he raised a hand to his mouth and wiped at it, finding only dry skin around his mouth. No signs of lake water at all.

He pushed himself upright into a sitting position, surprised at how much pain he was in. His hands lightly touched his ribs, and shifting his shoulders pulled the skin at his back. His cheek throbbed where August had slapped it. His eye still hurt from when he'd burst the blood vessel resisting the compulsion to share his plans. He felt ill. Even after the sleep, he could feel how little power he had left. Once it was gone, he wouldn't be coming back.

He was on a mass of blankets pushed together into something approximating a bed. Nearby was a pitcher of clean water and an empty glass. He smelled humidity as a thick moisture in his nose, spices, a distant, thick musk; like something a giant animal might leave behind as it wandered through the jungle. He looked around and saw Makara sitting at a great stone table, a calligraphy brush poised in one hand as he rested his head in the other, watching Jack calmly.

Jack stood up, winced. He felt padding against his skin shift as he moved. His clothing was different, and he felt underneath the new charcoal sweatshirt only to brush over bandages wrapped around his torso.

'Your wounds were becoming infected,' Makara explained, momentarily resting his brush on a dish of silvery ink. 'They required cleaning and dressing. You needed the sleep so much you did not even begin to rouse.'

'I...' Jack shivered. The idea of someone else touching him while he was unconscious made him feel sick. 'You touched me.'

Makara's face transformed from calm to sorrow, the smooth skin of his face creasing into well-worn lines.

'It is rude to compare one's host to the young Lord of the Unseelie Court,' he said. Though he didn't sound truly reproving, as Gwyn might. The words were censure, but the tone behind them offered nothing but sympathy. Jack realised uncomfortably that if what Makara had said was true,



if he really could see into the hearts and minds of everyone he encountered, then he knew *everything*.

To distract himself from that discomfiting thought, Jack fingered the material of the new sweatshirt. It was dark grey, made of very fine material. It was unmistakably modelled on the design of his old hoodie. His new pants were black, wrapped securely around his calves with a very dark leather. He started to reach down to touch it, but was hampered by the bite wound that stretched around his ribs. He hissed and straightened slowly.

‘Where did you get these?’ Jack said, and Makara picked up his brush again. He dipped it in the silvery ink, pressed excess off at the side of a pale ceramic bowl. Jack walked forwards as Makara started working again. He painted Sanskrit on a long stretch of midnight blue silk.

‘I made them while you were sleeping,’ Makara said, his brush moving slowly over the fabric. ‘Your other clothes were not serviceable. And I enjoy working with fabric.’

Jack looked down at his new clothing again, oddly touched. He didn’t mind the dark colours as much as he thought he would. And then he frowned. Where had Makara found the time to do all of that?

‘Wait, how long have I been asleep?’

Makara paused in his inking, sighed.

‘You will not like the answer to this. You have slept for four days.’

*Oh no.* Jack’s world reeled around him. It was the longest he’d ever slept, uninterrupted. And he *still* felt so tired, as though he’d hardly rested at all.

Four more days of Pitch being trapped in those shadows, and he knew – could tell from the nightmare the Nightmare King had given him – that the Nightmare King was probably making Pitch’s life a living hell.

‘How are you feeling?’ Makara said, and Jack wondered why he asked questions at all if he already knew the answers to them.

‘I’m not feeling very well,’ Jack said quietly, ‘Better, but not well.’

Makara nodded, unsurprised.

‘This is as good as it is going to get for you, from now on. Do you understand what I am saying?’ Makara paused, meeting Jack’s eyes again with his brown ones. ‘I see you do.’

Jack wrapped a careful arm around his side, the closest thing to self-soothing he could manage. He had been trying to tell himself that it didn’t matter if he died, that it couldn’t matter. That it was an acceptable price for saving Pitch – and he still believed *that*, but he didn’t want to waste into nothingness. He didn’t want to know what it would be like to gasp his last unnecessary breath and wonder what a life with Pitch could have looked like; it was stupid, he didn’t even know if Pitch wanted that. He couldn’t manage the full weight of his grief, but a tiny spiral of the stuff crept up from the hard mass of ice around his heart.

‘All that you’ve been through,’ Makara said, ‘and you still do not want to die? Intriguing.’

Jack looked at the scarf, and frowned.

‘Are you sure this will work? What if he realises that I’m scared of him realising I’m even wearing the scarf in the first place? Or, what if he realises that I’m scared of him realising that I’m scared of him realising that I’m wearing the scarf. I mean, what-’

‘I am very good at this,’ Makara said, smiling down at the long lengths of silvery sentences in front of him. ‘Very, very good. I know what you need, that is what I shall provide. I am always very thorough. You may fear that he will find out about this scarf, or fear that you will fear that he will find out about this scarf, or any other of a hundred or more permutations, and he will not know you fear these things for so long as you wear it.’

‘Am I bothering you? Do you want me to leave you alone?’ Jack said, suddenly realising that Makara might want to concentrate, might not be in the mood for the questions that kept piling on top of each other in his mind.

‘Not at all, it is lovely to have such company. Would you like some fruit?’ Makara tilted his head to a golden fruit bowl to the right of his ink. Jack didn’t recognise the majority of what was in there, and he suspected that some of the fruit didn’t grow in the human world, but was cultivated in the otherworld that Gwyn was so fond of talking about. He picked a couple of dark, red-purple grapes and ate them. The sugar was warming. Makara was right, it did help.

‘You told Gwyn where I was?’ Jack said, and Makara nodded.

‘I did. I spoke through a messenger, and he returned a message through a speaker. He said that he understood immediately what was happening, once he knew that you were here. He said to tell you that he does not appreciate your methods, and that he will have a talk with you later. It sounded rather like a father wanting to lecture a wayward son. I found that curious. You are an adult, more than capable of making your own decisions, are you not?’

Jack swallowed the second grape awkwardly. He could just imagine the kind of lecture that Gwyn had waiting. He was starting to think that Gwyn actually enjoyed disapproving of other people; he spent a lot of time doing it.

It bothered him, hearing Makara refer to him as an adult. Because although he knew that he was, no one else ever seemed to treat him that way. And yet Makara treated him not like an indulged child, not like a naive spirit who didn’t know anything, but a peer. It was disconcerting, it highlighted how little it happened in the rest of his life.

Makara smiled down at the dark blue scarf, tucked a length of black hair behind his ears.

‘It doesn’t matter how the others see you, what I have stated is actually true. You stepped into adulthood voluntarily and with courage hundreds of years ago, and shame on those who only see what they wish to see when they look at you, or judge a sliver of your behaviour without having the rest to compare it to.’

Jack picked another grape to hide his nervousness, and then walked away from Makara and the scarf, down towards one of the giant, carved pillars that supported the underground corridor. This one was made of hundreds of deformed crocodiles, each more revolting than the rest. Their wicked teeth and cruel eyes were filled with a terrible, blood-thirsty promise. Jack touched the snout of one, and swallowed.

‘This is the kind of thing people normally see when they look at you. Isn’t it?’

Makara didn’t answer straight away, he looked at Jack with his eyes half-shut, scrutinising.

‘You do not see these things? These great beasts around you?’

Jack frowned.

‘You don’t know what I see? I thought you could see everything, you’ve been reading my mind pretty well so far.’

Makara chuckled.

‘I can, indeed, see into the minds of all. There is only one mind that eludes me, and it is my own. And, for some reason, this means that I can never truly perceive myself – even in the minds of others. Even when I look down at my body, it is constantly changing, a never-settling-form. This strange alchemy means that I appear as a different being to everyone. As you can see from the carvings around you, this being is often monstrous, large and if it may sound self-indulgent to say so; terrifying.’

‘I must’ve missed the memo,’ Jack said quietly, looking around at all of the beasts, at their permutations and mutations, their snarls and bared teeth. He wondered what the Nain Rouge saw. He looked at Makara again, half-expecting his form to shift now that he knew he wasn’t seeing what most people saw; but it didn’t. He was still a nude man wearing a gold crown, sitting awkwardly on a tail made of peacock feathers.

‘So you’ll never really get to know what your true form is?’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ Makara said cryptically.

‘Do you ever get bored? I get the sense you’ve been alive for a really long time.’

‘Bored of life? Not anymore. I went through a period of time where I thought I knew everything and had done everything there was to do. But no, a long, long time ago I discarded boredom. It was a scarf I didn’t need to wear anymore. I believe we all wear some sort of scarf to block others from realising something about us, or to block ourselves from coming to some realisation that may be important. I just bring those scarves forth and weave them from the ether, so that you may use this to your best advantage.

‘But the most important part of putting on this scarf, any scarf, is the moment it comes off. That is where the alchemy lies. Whether it is removed, or voluntarily discarded, for example. This will impact how the world will change around you and inside you. These things – how we wear our scarves and why we remove them – dictate the consequences of having worn the scarf in the first place. For make no mistake, there *are* consequences.’

Jack said nothing. He tried to lean back against the pillar, but one of the stone crocodile tails pressed into the bite wound at his side, and he stepped away.

He realised that even if Makara was Unseelie, even if he was supposed to be all of these terrible, awful creatures, Jack liked him. It was as though Makara gave him honesty in return for his involuntary ability to see the truth in Jack’s mind. That struck him as a very fair thing to do, and not at all like what he’d experienced from other Unseelie fae. Or, now that he thought about it, *any* of the fae.

‘So how much blood is this going to cost me?’ Jack said, and Makara finished a line of Sanskrit with a flourish.

‘Blood? I would ask you what sort of company you had been keeping, but of course I know. Those Glasera, they may be a crude people, but their smiths are exquisite. I do not ask for blood.’

‘Uh, so, what then?’ Jack said, apprehensive.

Makara waved a hand at the sculptures around him.

‘I would like for you to create my likeness, using whatever methods you are most comfortable with. For some it is sculpture, for others painting, and wordsmiths of course use prose and poetry.’

Jack narrowed his eyes, it seemed like a surprisingly simple request.

‘There are rules, of course,’ Makara said. ‘You are not to flatter me. You are not to misrepresent. You are not to change what you see with the intention of making me happy. You are not to lie in your rendering, for though I cannot see how you see me, I can see the intention to lie about what you see, I can see the act of lying. I will tolerate the intention, but I will not tolerate the act itself. And you do not wish to anger me.’

Jack’s heart thumped hard in response. Makara’s tone hadn’t changed, he sounded just as wise and gentle as ever, but just as the Nain Rouge’s revelation of her ancientness had struck him deep at his core, so Makara revealing this promise that Jack would not wish to see him angry burst through his chest. It was a reminder that he was dealing with someone who could be unpredictable, who the Nain Rouge had described as being, ‘fickle as shit.’ It was like Makara had peeled back one of those invisible scarves he had talked about, and shown Jack a glimpse of what lurked beneath.

‘C-can I use ice?’ Jack said, surprised at his nervousness. It was partly that he definitely didn’t want to anger Makara, but mostly that he wanted to do a good job.

‘You may use whatever you wish,’ Makara said. He focused again on the scarf, and the silence that lapsed between them was almost comfortable. Jack looked at Makara and decided he might as well start. He wasn’t sure where he was supposed to put the sculpture, but as it was ice, and impermanent, eventually he decided that it didn’t matter. He had enough room to do it where he was standing.

He summoned up a block of ice with his staff, ignoring how even that simple act made him feel drained. He tried to squash down the fact that this was his new baseline of energy, even after sleeping for four days.

He pressed his fingers to the ice, closed his eyes. He started at the top, turning the unwanted ice into frost particles and blowing it away. Diamond dust hazed into a nimbus around him. He lifted his eyes to Makara frequently, but he felt like he didn’t actually need to. He knew Makara, just as he knew Pitch, and North and all the other Guardians. The wind that carried him through the sky had also wrapped itself around those he had come to know throughout the years, and left him with a sense of their shape. The wind helped him now.

The work was easier than he thought it would be once he started. He didn’t see the point in lying. He could have tried to make Makara look younger than what he saw, tried to make the peacock tail less overwhelming, more in proportion to the rest of his features. But they were small things that didn’t need doing. He was pretty sure other people asked to do this were trying to think of things like: ‘Hm, how do I make this demented crocodile beast look less like a demented crocodile beast?’ All in all, Jack could tell he was fortunate.

He was curious to know why he saw Makara the way he did. Was it that he was so naive? But then, it wasn’t like he hadn’t been pre-warned by the Nain Rouge, and seen the carvings, and then heard the *growl*.

Jack was adding detail to the peacock tail when he decided to start talking again. He’d checked

Makara several times, but Makara had – as far as Jack could tell – refused to look at the sculpture once he'd started it.

'So, like, the last three people who visited you for scarves. What'd they all...sculpt or draw for you?'

'The last three?' Makara didn't look up, even as he dipped his brush into the silvery swirl of ink. 'I refused scarves to the previous three who visited, so I never discovered what they saw.'

Jack stopped what he was doing and stared down at the peacock train he was convincing the ice to become. Diamond dust fuzzed prettily around his hand, catching the light of strong, flaming torches all around him.

'The last *three*?'

'The last four, actually. But you asked for the last three. The last one who visited me for a scarf was the Each Uisge. He went away empty-handed.'

Jack leaned his head against the sculpture, wide-eyed.

'He...' Jack tried to quell the fear that was rising inside of him. It was strange, but when Gwyn had mentioned him by name, Jack hadn't felt anything except a numbness, a voiceless dislike. But now fear swelled. He saw flashes of the nightmare he'd had before waking, all those choppy, awful images. He tried to make himself focus. The Each Uisge had come for a fear-blocking scarf? Recently?

'He wanted a scarf to block his fears from the *Nightmare King*?' Jack said, brow furrowing in confusion, mouth dropping open. 'What was he trying to hide?'

Jack wanted to stand up quickly, to turn and interrogate. But his injuries wouldn't allow it. Every movement he made had to be slow and measured.

'You would know, right?' Jack said. 'You know what he was trying to hide?'

'I do know.' Makara tapped his brush on the edge of the ceramic bowl, just like normal. 'But I do not share the hidden that I see in others. I suppose you could say that I am one of the world's better secret keepers. I cannot share what I saw in his mind. I could tell you what he spoke of, but I refused him before he even had an opportunity to say it aloud. That water fae has not made friends amongst his fellow water wights.'

'But he's your King, isn't he? Your Lord? Even if he's young, don't you have to do what he says?' It took long enough, but Jack finally stood and faced Makara, who still wasn't looking up at him.

Makara laughed silently. His shoulders shook, he had placed a single hand over his eyes. Jack could hear the quiet puffs of breath.

'You *don't* have to do what he says?'

'There is only one I obey, and that is my master – Ganga, Goddess of the Ganges.'

'You know, you're not like the other Unseelie fae that I've met,' Jack said quietly, turning back to the sculpture and squinting at the diamond dust hovering all around it. It hadn't been that long ago that his hands had sung frost particles into the shape of a weapon that North had made for him. And before that, once he had created a space for a small rabbit of frost in his arms, to prove to a child that Bunnymund still existed.

*Maybe...*

‘You haven’t met that many. And those that live nearest the Courts, on either side, tend to be those vying for power. I find I am quite fond of Albion, however. In point of fact, Lord Gwyn was very wise when he chose his Court. You, also, after only one meeting, seem to have a soft spot for Albion. He is very stabilising, is he not? He matured remarkably quickly for a fae with so much power, and the first time he visited me, he did not even want a scarf. He just wanted to meet me. It was quite flattering, if you must know.’

Jack held shaking hands out to the nearly finished sculpture and concentrated hard. This required a larger amount of frost magic, but the diamond dust was already present in abundance and he didn’t need to create much more. He drew the frost particles away from the sculpture and a shape coalesced together. If he could just...

The Makara-made-of-frost-particles turned to look at his own peacock tail. Jack smiled, tentatively, as he managed to replicate Makara’s confident, gentle movement. This creation definitely looked like the Makara he saw. He didn’t know if he’d still have to finish the sculpture. He hoped that Makara would like what he’d done, he didn’t know if many of the others who had visited him could do something like this.

Turning, he sent frost-Makara walking quietly towards the real vahana of the Ganges, who inked methodically. It was almost easy to imagine each footfall brushing softly against stone, the tail swishing with every step. The diamond dust made no sound, but the body movements settled correctly. Frost-Makara reached up and brushed a length of hair behind his ear and Jack smiled in tired satisfaction, leaning against his own ice sculpture.

‘I decided to try something different,’ Jack said, ‘You can look now.’

Makara placed his brush down and folded his arms on the table in front of him. He closed his eyes, his breathing became very slow, very deep. It was almost as though he were calming himself. Jack supposed it was nerve-wracking, never knowing what to expect, never certain what he would be confronted with.

Frost-Makara walked towards one of the pillars. When Makara looked up and saw the ice sculpture, half-finished, his eyes narrowed. And then frost-Makara’s movement caught his eye and he turned and saw his animated self tracing a finger along the fangs of a deformed crocodile caught in a pillar of stone.

Makara was too ancient for shocked gasps, for widening eyes, but Jack could tell he was shocked. Could tell that he was mesmerised by the way he stared – long and unblinking – the lines around his mouth taut.

‘You see me as beautiful,’ Makara said, his voice even and still awed.

‘I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t finish the sculpture,’ Jack said, ‘I can do both. I just thought that-’

‘This suffices,’ Makara interrupted, staring as Jack made frost-Makara turn and walk to the huge stone table, feet measuring steps out against the floor, tail swaying back and forth. Makara smiled in delight.

‘Would that I actually looked like this,’ Makara said, and Jack felt a small warmth spark through him, something dusty and forgotten.

‘You could look like this, you know. I mean you don’t actually know, so you could just...choose how you see yourself, right?’

‘As the majority of people show me as these monsters,’ Makara said, looking around the corridor, ‘I expect that you are – alas – not correct. And I find that I am uncommonly vain now that I have seen this. Perhaps you have spoiled me.’

Jack made frost-Makara lean over the table and look down at the scarf. Makara watched the moving sculpture’s every movement, as though he was trying to sear the memory of it into his mind.

‘Well,’ Jack said, ‘the majority of people see *me* as some young upstart who should just get out of the way. I mean, that’s how it’s been for the past three hundred years. And then you went and called me an adult, capable of making my own choices, and it’s something I want to be true even though...if I went with the crowd, I wouldn’t be able to believe you, would I? So, I reckon, believe what you want. If you like this, then why not this? It’s not like you’ll find out any time soon anyway. Why not stick with what you like?’

Makara looked through the animated frost sculpture to Jack, and tilted his head to the side.

‘You can let it go now,’ Makara said, ‘the magic of it. I know it taxes you.’

Jack felt a wave of relief. It wasn’t easy to sustain the realistic movements of the frost particles. He let the moving sculpture linger a while longer, and then – as he looked at his work in satisfaction, ready to let it go – something occurred to him. Something *big*.

‘Oh,’ Jack said, exhaling hard. The fingers of both hands fluttered up to the locket he wore. *No, it wouldn’t work, would it? Could that possibly work?*

He had to speak to Gwyn. Something of a plan was falling into place in his mind. Puzzle pieces slotted together, one after the other. His mind whispered, ‘if we do that, then we can do that, and that, and *that*.’

The ice sculpture dropped away as Jack’s concentration bent its weight elsewhere, and he stared into the middle distance, turning the plan over in his mind. He, of all people, had a *plan*.

*Is this a thing I do now?*

Makara stood, picked up the deep blue scarf. It was absolutely covered in silver Sanskrit. It seemed to need far more of the writing than the Nain Rouge’s ever had, and there were even tiny little phrases all around the edges. He stepped down gracefully, his peacock train flaring behind him briefly as he approached Jack. The peacock tail was a little big, but it must have looked amazing when it was spread properly, catching the torchlight. Other people saw a monster, but Jack thought Makara was beautiful.

‘Do you know why they think of you as such a child? Would you like to know?’ Makara said, pulling the scarf through his fingers. None of the silver ink smudged, and Jack realised it must dry immediately.

‘Because I’m so reckless?’ Jack said, thinking about how he’d just left Gwyn out there in the snow in order to visit the Nain Rouge.

He needed to get back. If his plan was workable, they could start tomorrow, they could start as soon as Gwyn and his soldiers could start.

*Tomorrow.*

‘Partly that, but no, that is not the main reason.’

Makara knelt in front of him and Jack’s breath stuttered in his throat. Another Unseelie fae had knelt, *behind him*, and then there had been nothing but pain and blood and then-

‘I need you to lift up your sweatshirt, please. The first time it is attached, I must be the one to do it. Afterwards, you may remove and replace it at will.’

Jack was grateful for the chance to focus. And of course – he realised – Makara knew what he was thinking, what he was frightened of, what he didn’t want to remember. For some reason, that helped.

Jack lifted up the new hoodie, and murmured, disturbed, when he saw huge black bruises creeping across his torso, stretching beyond the reach of the bandages.

‘Are you serious?’ Jack whispered, touching the bruised skin lightly. ‘God, no wonder it hurts so much.’

‘There is poison in the Each Uisge’s bite. It’s often not fatal on its own, but...I am glad that I was able to clean your wounds when I did. It could have been much worse.’

Jack lifted his hand as Makara reached calmly around him and tied the scarf at his back gently, making sure the knot didn’t rest on a bruise. The scarf didn’t make him feel any different. It felt like light material resting against his skin. It didn’t feel like magic of any kind. If he hadn’t seen how well it had worked for the Nain Rouge, he wouldn’t have believed it could work.

Torchlight gleamed off Makara’s golden crown, there were streaks of white in his black hair. This close, he could see the individual pores on his forehead and a gleam of oil on the bridge of his nose. He looked so *normal*. How could anyone else see a beast? What was he missing?

Makara drew back, settled calmly on his calves. He smiled.

‘They think you are a child, because openness is a rare quality to take with you into adulthood. Because you are so open.’

Jack blinked. He remembered Pitch, the pained way he’d once exclaimed, ‘*You are so open.*’ And Jack remembered defending himself, defending his openness, explaining that it wasn’t naivete, that it had served him well over the years.

‘They see your authenticity, and they think that you have not learned a single thing. And while it is true that there are gaps in your knowledge, woe befall those who underestimate you. Perhaps they wish to protect you. I do not know. Even some adults need protecting, after all. But you also protect. And I know that you are no child.’

Jack craved someone who would talk to him like this. Pitch came close, but they had still been finding their way, learning each other, before he’d been ripped of Jack’s grasp. Makara being able to see into his mind like this, Jack didn’t find it invasive at all. It was a relief. He was being *seen* by someone, and that someone wasn’t rejecting him for whatever sins had created his loneliness.

Makara stood up and smiled, pleased. His eyes sparkled.

‘You like me,’ Makara said, and Jack flushed chill.



‘Uh...’

‘Not many people like me,’ Makara added.

‘Seriously? *Why*? You gave me new clothes that you *made* for me. You gave me food, and water, a scarf, you pushed blankets into a bed for me. Seriously...what are you doing to the others who visit?’

‘I do nothing differently. I treat everyone the same. I offer everyone refreshments, because it is polite, and because I wish to. My fruit is nourishing. But most people cannot see past...what they see. And then they begin to lie. They knowingly lie to me. I can tolerate the lies that people tell themselves without realising. But when people knowingly lie to *me*. I cannot tolerate this.’

Makara said it calmly, but Jack instantly filed away the knowledge that he should never lie to Makara ever, about *anything*. He’d heard that growl, he’d heard the menace lurking inside of it.

‘Would you like to be friends?’ Makara said. ‘Would you visit me again?’

‘Uh, well, if I’m not dead in like...a week. Then, yeah.’ Jack ran an awkward hand through his hair, wishing that the movement didn’t pull so heavily at his bruises. ‘Actually,’ Jack smiled hesitantly, ‘yeah, I really would.’

‘You could help me in my gardens. I grow a lot of fruit. Some of the rare ones do better when iced, like the snow pears of Ala’hito. And as you can imagine, ice does not find its way down here too often.’

Jack felt a rush of affection for the man. It was like meeting a distant uncle, one who was not only hospitable, who cared for a person’s needs, but who turned out to be a genuine, loving family member.

But Jack didn’t think he’d see him again. He was, at least, glad to have had this encounter, even if it would be his last.

‘How do I get home? I have to...I have to talk to Gwyn,’ Jack said, and Makara nodded.

‘A few things, before you leave. The first is that you must be careful.’

‘I will,’ Jack said, automatically. It wasn’t *quite* a lie. He’d be careful in terms of keeping himself alive for as long as he needed to until he got Pitch back.

‘No. You are honest with us, but you lie to yourself a lot. And those lies, Jack, they cannot last long in a heart like yours. They will hurt you. And you must be careful of them.’

Jack’s lips thinned.

‘The second thing is that- I suspect you know this, but you have not said it to yourself out loud, or heard it said to you by someone else. So there is something I must tell you. You love that man more than you’ve ever loved anyone.’

Makara said it so easily, but Jack’s feet shifted, wanting to take him a step backwards, to hide from the truth. It was one thing to live the resolve, to decide that Pitch was worth his focus, his attention, his *life*. It was another to have the reason for that laid out in front of him. It made Jack feel momentarily ashamed of himself. That he hadn’t realised sooner, that he hadn’t said something, that he couldn’t do *more*.

‘The third thing,’ Makara said, face creasing in sympathy, ‘is that you will learn how to move through space if you allow enough time. If you live, this is a skill you will learn naturally. I know your envy for those of us who can start in one place and end up half a world away without a second thought. Listen to your friend the wind, for it will help you to learn this. It may be a hundred years, two hundred, but it is coming.’

‘If I live that long,’ Jack whispered.

‘If you live that long,’ Makara said, expression serious. ‘Now, I cannot send you directly to the Seelie Court, as I believe you wish. But I can send you to North’s Workshop, and you may summon the Lord of the Seelie Court there. Is this what you desire?’

Jack knew that North had a horn with which he could summon Gwyn, and decided it would have to do. Before he could even affirm that it’s what he wanted, Makara was already nodding in agreement.

‘Then farewell, friend. And may we meet again.’

Makara didn’t blink, didn’t move, didn’t even reach out and touch him. He didn’t need to, apparently being ancient came with some extra oomph when it came to helping someone teleport. Jack felt himself dissolve into a deep, jungle green, hurtling through a glittering twilight, on his way to North’s Workshop.

\*

‘Hey, North,’ Jack said, finding him in the kitchens by several huge, sticky rounds of cookie dough. North was surveying the progress of the others, though his hands were covered in flour. Jack was shocked to see that it was the yeti who actually rolled out the dough itself, and cut the cookie shapes out. He wondered if they ever got fur in what they made.

‘*Jack!*’ North exclaimed, spinning around and then pausing when he took in Jack’s appearance; the new clothes, the bruising on his face, the burst blood vessel of his eye. ‘Jack? What have-’

‘Before the third degree begins, what has Gwyn told you? About where I’ve been?’ Jack said, conscious of the scarf around his middle, of the padding beneath the charcoal sweatshirt, of realising that he didn’t want North to know what had happened. He didn’t think Gwyn would tell North about his encounter with Augus unless he thought it necessary, and he hoped that Gwyn didn’t think it would be necessary. He hadn’t even thought to tell him *not* to, he’d just left. And then slept for four days. Anything could have happened.

‘Only that you are trying out the weapons, and that you went on big secret assignment. But Jack, someone has hit you. I know the signs.’

Knowing that Gwyn hadn’t told North anything at all, was a cool breeze of relief moving through him. It took going over the rest of what North had said to realise that North had managed to see a great deal without knowing any details. What could he say to that grim expression? Those heavy, black eyebrows? Jack nodded, and then when that didn’t seem to be enough, he nodded again.

‘Well, yeah, you know. It’s fine, North. These things happen. I’m not like some fragile snowflake or anything. I might not be able to take a punch as well as you can, but you know, I can still take a punch.’

Jack managed a laugh that almost sounded halfway easy. He cringed internally. That was the kind of lie that Makara likely wouldn’t appreciate if he’d heard it in person. The look North gave him

indicated that he saw straight past the lie, though to what, Jack didn't know. North's face was clouded, as though he wanted to pursue the subject, but then he closed his eyes, resigned.

Then, strangely, a small, excited smile crept over his face.

'Jack, we are having something to show you.'

'Yeah, that's great, North, but just quickly, do you still have that horn that Gwyn gave you? The one to summon him? I need to call him over, it's pretty urgent.'

'Yes, yes, but I think we have more urgent thing to be showing you. We are having-'

'Yeah, North, but I *really* need that horn,' Jack said, following an excited North out of the kitchens and into the central area of the Workshop. He didn't even want to know what North's definition of urgent was, not with an expression like that. Knowing him it was some new toy design, or...Jack couldn't even guess anymore. The sooner he told Gwyn his plan, the sooner they could decide if it was worthwhile, the sooner they could- *Maybe, if it worked...*

'Jack, no, we are having *surprise* for you,' North insisted, turning to face Jack, cheeks flushing red and eyes sparkling as he lead Jack up the stairs towards the second landing. 'We are having surprise for you. Just you wait.'

Jack wanted to say that he'd be happy to receive whatever surprise North had in mind, as long as he could just blow that stupid horn first and get Gwyn's attention. He was halfway through rolling his eyes to the ceiling when he saw her.

Impossibly, he saw *her*.

*No, not already, not now. Is this really happening? I, I thought...*

Jack's mouth went dry. He forgot his pain as she galloped towards him through the air, down through the centre of the Workshop, evading Sandy and tossing her head freely as though she never cared about being dissolved in dreamsand, like no time had passed. Her mane streamed black and coarse behind her, she gleamed healthily, body as small and well-formed as it had always been. When she saw that he had seen her, she let out an unearthly shriek, the very kind that she had sung on the winds to urge him on, *faster*, as they raced together.

The answer he gave her – a shout of acknowledgement and joy and wonder – hurt his ribs and he didn't care. He held out his hands to her, shaking, hardly able to believe she was real.

She landed a few feet away from him, and then lifted her hooves coquettishly as she approached, veering off to the side and circling him as she used to. And he turned with her, couldn't help it, even as his hands came up and – shaking uncontrollably now – ghosted over her without daring to touch her, not yet, just in case she proved to be a phantom. She sniffed at his side, and then nosed his sweatshirt delicately. She snuffled around his injury and her flanks rose and fell in a huge sigh.

When he felt a familiar spiral of fear rise up inside of him, the one that only she could evoke, that no facsimile could create, he let out a sound that was half sob, half laughter.

'*Mora?*' he whispered, curling one hand around her flaring nostrils and watching as she shuddered all over at the touch. 'Oh, god, Mora? But...' His other hand came up and smoothed over an anomaly that hadn't been there before. A star of golden sand in the centre of her forehead, an unexpected, striking adornment. He trailed fingers through her sandy mane, felt her body heat, as warm and comforting as it had been back when he'd woken from nightmares only to see her steady presence beside him, watching and making the most of his fear by turning it into food.

‘Surprise!’ North said, belatedly.

Jack wrapped his arms around Mora, riding out the neutral fear that didn’t remind him of anything except fear itself. He found that fear easier to bear now, given everything he had been through. A laugh rich with love sounded in his chest and only just made it past his lips.

North’s eyes were gleaming with tears, his smile was tremulous.

Sandy landed on the banister next to North, and promptly put his hands on his hips, pursing his lips in frustration. Symbols burst rapidly over the top of his head even as Jack draped his arms around Mora’s neck and ignored the way it hurt him to do so. Seeing her again made it so easy to push the pain away. And she, in turn, bowed her neck towards him, nickering in acknowledgement, lipping gently at the base of his sweatshirt. He wanted to lean against her until he found his strength again, he wanted to talk to her, to let her know how much he’d missed her, how much he’d thought of her.

‘Sandy says she would not stay put for the surprise,’ North translated, and Jack was heaving out breaths of laughter that hurt his lungs, that were almost painful. It was harder, these days, to express joy.

‘Things have been- I’ve been so...’ Jack said to Mora, ‘I’ve been- Oh god, it *is* you, isn’t it? Isn’t it?’

She quivered with energy beneath his arms, electric with life, her will thrumming through her whole body. He didn’t know exactly what her energy had felt like until it was gone, when he could sense the empty Mora shape that wasn’t beside him anymore. Now that he had her back, it was so unmistakably her. Even with the golden sand shaped into a star at her forehead.

‘Sandy says to tell you that he had to put some of his dreamsand into her coat. Only a little, at her forehead. It doesn’t change her essential nature – slow *down*, Sandy, give me a chance to be saying these things! – but it means that she will never dissolve into the dreamsand again unless she is *wanting* to be. Also, she can be feeding from the dreamsand, and *good* dreams, so that you do not have to be having bad dreams every time you are sleeping, yes?’

Jack looked up at Sandy, eyes widening.

‘Good dreams too?’

The symbols continued unabated, and North squinted as he watched them all.

‘Sandy is saying that she cannot *make* good dreams, only feed from them. That also, she is being immune to metal in Pitch’s sword and also, that the golden light will never hurt her, though it may make her uncomfortable like...like...Sandy even *I* am not knowing what that means. Ah! Like bad temperature, feeling too hot or too cold.’

Mora hopped up onto the winds and he followed, clumsily, spinning in the air as she pranced around him. Her movement was as confident and playful as it had always been, and he wanted to fly on the winds with her. He could tell she wanted the chance to rediscover their bond.

But he couldn’t. He felt the gulf that had opened up between them. He wasn’t the same Jack he’d been when she’d disappeared. And he thought he’d been different then – drained and tired and cynical. But he knew – in his reluctance to simply join her on the winds where once he would not have hesitated – that everything had changed. He wanted to, and he *would*, it was just that he had to summon Gwyn. He had to do that *first*.

‘Mora,’ he whispered, as he lowered to the ground once more. She turned to him immediately,

pressing her head so gently against his good side that he wanted to cling and never let go.

‘Ah,’ North said curiously, ‘also, Sandy says that Mora also wants to know why you never ride her.’

‘What?’ Jack said, looking first into Mora’s glowing eyes, and then up at Sandy in confusion. ‘Ride her? But she’s my friend.’

‘She is also being small and Jack-sized and good for riding,’ North said, and Mora stepped back, tossed her head in vigorous agreement.

‘You want that?’ Jack said directly to Mora. She whickered. She pawed the ground, then, eyeing him sideways, dropped slowly to her front knees, inviting him to mount. He couldn’t believe it. He’d never even thought of her that way. She had always just been Mora, friend and companion, strange tree-sleeping horse-vulture. He had a flash of a future where, along with riding the winds with her, he could literally *ride the winds* on her back. She understood the movements of the high altitude winds now almost as well as he did.

He wished, with a sudden pang, that Pitch was here to see this. Pitch had missed her too.

‘North,’ Jack said, walking up to Mora and coaxing her upright with two hands under her velvety chin. ‘North, I really need that horn. I mean, I’m sorry, but-’

‘I am getting it right now!’ North said with a huge smile, and loped off quickly.

Sandy continued to watch, a tired smile on his face. Jack walked over to him, Mora following with her muzzle in the palm of his hand, small scrolls of frost decorating her nose. He wanted to hug him, but it would reveal his injuries. He wanted to offer something, but he didn’t know what he had left to give. He didn’t blame Sandy anymore for what had happened. After all, it was Sandy who said it might take years to bring Mora back, and then had spent all his remaining waking hours sifting through sand, reducing that time-frame, wearing himself ragged.

‘Sandy, I don’t even know where to start, hey...’ Jack said, awkwardly. Sandy beamed at him, and then pointed at his eye, at his face, where Jack was injured. Above his head, he showed the picture of a fist thumping into an open palm. He was clearly promising revenge.

‘No, it’s fine. Honestly, Sandy, I’m here aren’t I? Mora’s here? It’s good. But...I need to ask you something, while North’s not here.’ He wrapped an arm around Mora’s head, scratched underneath her eye, felt warmth against his side and missed Pitch with such a bone-deep longing that it was caustic in his chest. It felt like an open wound. He couldn’t make himself let her go.

‘I’m...I’m not well, and I don’t think there’s a cure and, and even if there was, we don’t have the time to look for one. So, well, if anything happens to me...’ *Shit, this is harder than I thought it would be.* Jack took a deep breath, looked away from the growing concern and realisation on Sandy’s face. ‘Two things I guess. If Pitch comes back, and I’m not around, could you make sure he looks after Mora? I think they would- I think they could help each other. And, and if for some reason I’m not around and Pitch...and Pitch doesn’t make it...’

Jack stared hard at the floor, because he *had* to save Pitch, he had to, there was no other option. But he needed to plan for all possibilities, because she was Mora, because she deserved at least that much.

‘Can you just make sure she’s looked after, and not alone?’ Jack said in a rush.

He tilted his head up and sideways when he couldn’t bear it anymore, sneaking a glimpse of

Sandy. His head was resting in the palm of his hands and his body language drooped. He didn't flash any symbols above his head, didn't do anything except watch with eyes creased in sadness, acceptance, grief. It was an expression that didn't suit his usually calm and pleasant face.

'But you'll do it?' Jack whispered, as he caught North coming back with the horn.

Sandy nodded, morose.

Jack didn't let go of Mora as North handed him the horn. He offered a weak smile of thanks, and then felt his neck and back tense when North's expression became grim.

'Jack, you are not telling us much of anything.'

'I'm sorry, North. I- I'll tell you more, I promise, when the worst of this is over. I-'

'You have not been stopping, since Pitch was lost. Toothiana was over here yesterday talking about intervention. I said, 'No, we have to trust he knows what he is doing,' but, Jack, we just want to *help*.'

Jack's arm paused halfway to raising the horn to his mouth. He looked between Sandy and North. How would he ever begin to explain to them everything he'd done? Everything he'd been through? The mountain, the Glasera, destroying Pitch's sword and what that had felt like, having frozen blood scraped from his back, kissing the King of the Seelie Court because of glamour and loss and loneliness. Only to end up dragged underwater – *drowning* – by the King of the Unseelie Court, and...and...

And what was the point in telling them anything at all, if he was just going to die anyway?

Jack raised the horn to his lips and took a deep breath, blowing hard. A long, sonorous note rang out through North's Workshop, vibrated through the walls. Even the yeti stopped what they were doing and turned, eyes wide. Jack lowered the horn and raised his eyebrows.

'Wow, that was loud, huh?'

'Jack,' North said, taking the horn back and focusing his full attention on Jack, 'I swore I would not get angry, and I will not- I am *not* angry, but you come back after days of being away, and, Sandy, please would you be helping me out here.'

Sandy, who was still looking gloomy, shook his head resolutely and simply stared at Jack with resigned, sad features.

'Sandy, we *talked* about this thing,' North said, eyebrows knotting together.

Sandy flashed the image of a tombstone over his head, and then a snowflake, and then for extra emphasis, pointed over at Jack.

'Well, thanks, even I understood that one,' Jack muttered. He wondered how long it would take Gwyn to arrive. And then his wonder turned to ice inside of him as he saw North's expression. He'd spent so long around Gwyn, who had just quietly accepted the reality of Jack's mortality, that it hadn't occurred to him that others might react differently.

*Oh no, this is not the right way for him to find out.*

'You are being *ridiculous*,' North said to Sandy, dismissing the symbols, denial etching a hard edge into every syllable. But he stepped closer to Jack, peered down into his face. His mouth

twisted, as though he could see Jack's lack of energy not just imprinted his features, but all the way at the bottom of him, where there was nothing more than a tired heap of cold.

North stepped back, let loose such a roar that Jack stumbled backwards. Mora backed up, shaking her head. Jack put a hand on her neck automatically.

'North...' Jack said, and North turned back to him, furious, eyes wet with tears. Jack braced himself, he didn't know what to expect.

'I did not *listen* to you! All this time, you were saying that you were needing it back, and I did not *listen to you*...I am an *idiot*. Shaposhnikoff! I could have been working on this. I should have been! I have had *time*! And instead I made assumption that...that...'

Jack was horrified at the depth of North's anger at himself. Sure, he'd been frustrated when North had told Jack that he simply might have to get used to part of his soul being gone, but none of them – at the time – had known that the Nain Rouge's attack was a mortal wound. Jack didn't want this self-recrimination. It was painful enough living with his own, he didn't need to see it painted in broad strokes across the features of another. He approached North warily, raising a hand and placing it on North's belly. North's breath was shuddering through his body, it made Jack's arm rise and fall.

'North, you're getting angry. You said you wouldn't. Please stop,' Jack said quietly. 'It's not worth it. Okay? We don't know what will happen, really, do we? Just- I don't have time to tell you everything. That's all.'

'This is why you are not healing. These bruises, your eye,' North said heavily. He placed his huge, broad hand over Jack's and left it there, closing his eyes. A tear made its way into his beard. Mora came up and snuffled between them, sticking her muzzle between both of their hands. Jack smiled at her. North shivered and then looked down.

'Does the fear she creates not upset you?' North said, and Jack shook his head.

'It never did. It really doesn't now. You just kinda breathe through it. Once you realise that it's just fear that's not attached to anything, it's pretty easy.'

Jack quickly broke away from North when a figure of light gleamed in front of them. He had no idea that's what he looked like when he teleported with Gwyn, since he'd never actually seen Gwyn appear right in front of him before. He wondered if Gwyn had some kind of connection with the horn, that he was able to appear right in front of it like this, and know exactly where they were.

Gwyn was pale, wearing the breeches and shirt that were a sign he'd been at the Seelie Court, or within his own palatial rooms. His hair was kinked out, as though he'd been sleeping and not had time to look at it. Recent events had worn Gwyn down, and he was less composed than he'd once been.

'Did something happen?' Gwyn said in a rush, 'Is everything alright? What do you need?'

But then he caught sight of Jack, and his expression changed. He walked towards him, clapped a hand on his shoulder, fingers digging in hard and Jack had one second to see his face go from frightened and sleep-mussed to stern with anger before he was dissolved into light and taken outside into the training fields.

Jack took a few steps backwards in the snow. He wanted some distance from that expression.

'I could *ki*-' Gwyn cut himself off, blue eyes blazing. He took a deep breath and started again.

‘Do you have *any IDEA* what y-’

‘Do the weapons work?’ Jack interrupted, not having time for the lecture. Gwyn looked angry enough to talk for hours.

‘I knew you were *stupid*, but I did not know that you were-’

‘*Do the weapons work, Gwyn?!*’ Jack yelled at him, nerves shaking his voice loose, making him shout against the rasp in his throat.

Gwyn blinked at him.

‘We managed to locate a stray Nightmare Man. Yes. The weapons are very effective. Obliterated it on the first pass-over.’

‘Good. Great. I have a plan. *Me*. I have an *actual* plan.’

Gwyn’s mouth dropped open for only a moment, before he mastered himself.

‘I’d best hear it then,’ he said. He had the audacity to look like he’d been expecting this all along.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Search and Rescue,' an 'actual plan' is put into action.



# Search and Rescue

## Chapter Notes

OMG you guys. THANK YOU. A thousand million thank yous.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

If someone had told Jack that he would be in the round table room one day, sorting through maps, strategically moving around pieces that represented soldiers, discussing the merits of a battle plan without feeling remotely sleepy or like it was the biggest time-waster on the planet, he would have laughed at them. Laughed a lot. He would have asked if they'd confused him with someone else, someone *boring*, and then probably flown off to make a snow day.

*Boy, things have changed.*

Jack closed his fingers around two clay pieces representing Gwyn's personal soldiers, and moved them from his small team, into another.

'Alright, we definitely don't need this many, only enough to set up and move the weapons around. If it works, our team should be smallest, it's probably safer that way if anything goes wrong. If the weapons fail, the Nightmare King will destroy everyone in the team.'

Gwyn nodded and made a note on a piece of parchment. Jack had missed it, all the other times he'd fallen asleep in meetings or begged out of them, but Gwyn noted everything down. He wrote in an unreadable shorthand, annotated maps, offered suggestions, made recommendations that actually helped and didn't undermine. Gwyn blew a breath out of his lungs and pursed his lips at the map.

'If it wasn't for the fact that I'm watching you doing this, right now, I wouldn't have believed it possible. Most people whose centres change, the shift is not so extreme. This is...this is a good plan, Jack. But I'm worried.'

Jack sat down in one of the large, wooden chairs. He leaned his left side against the back of the wood, and still winced as it pulled at his bad side. The wounds that August had given him were taking a long time to heal.

'Well, I don't know why you're so worried, it looks like you're benefitting to me.' Jack waved his hand over the maps.

'We've spent a fair amount of time in each other's company since Pitch was possessed by the shadows a second time, and, yes, at first I was relieved to see that you were taking things more seriously. But this?'

Jack drew one of his legs up, tried not to wince and failed. He checked on his bruises every time he checked to make sure the scarf wasn't falling off – it never was – and they were still sprawled masses of black stamped into his flesh. It was not reassuring for someone who was used to being able to deadfall out of the sky, hit the ground at speed, and pick himself up – no worse for the wear – a minute later.

He pointed to a section of the map and cleared his throat.

‘Are you sure Albion will lead one of the attacks? I remember you saying once that he’s a sea fae, and that he’s been reluctant to press directly against freshwater fae.’

‘Yes, he’s had enough,’ Gwyn said, grudgingly allowing the subject to change. ‘He’s strong, and his fae are strong. They will press a convincing attack. So, if we have Ondine’s party attack there, as you suggested, with Albion making a move afterwards, we have a much better chance of forging forwards successfully. August won’t suspect a double bluff, though he’ll suspect *something*.’

Jack nodded, picking up the tiny white piece that represented himself. It was nothing more than a lump of unpainted clay, and he turned it in his fingers slowly.

‘And you know we can’t tell anyone more-’

‘-More than what they absolutely have to know. Yes, of course. No one knows of the full plan except for you and I. That way, if the Nightmare King moves unpredictably – entirely possible – and reads the fears of those about to attack, he will not be able to connect the multiple actions together.’

‘You’ve got Peloton tracking the Nightmare King still, right? And you’re sure that’s safe?’

‘Mm. There’s no way the Nightmare King will be able to sense his fears, that boy doesn’t have a single one.’

‘Handy,’ Jack murmured. He couldn’t imagine what life would be like, not feeling any fear. Even now it was a constant thrumming baseline in his own body. It crept back up, pushing ice-blue tendrils through his lungs. It made him feel like his body was failing.

‘Very. As I was saying, before you tried to change the subject; I’m worried. You’re not stable, and-’

‘Alright, If you’re worried I’m going to flake out during the plan, you’ve got another thing coming. Okay? What makes you think I can’t keep it together? I think I’ve-’

‘This isn’t about the plan,’ Gwyn said, knocking over his own golden clay figurine with a single finger. It rolled in a semi-circle on the table. ‘This is about you. You can’t just snap back to everything that’s familiar, now that you’ve left it all behind. Even if you get Pitch back, and this works, and we celebrate- Do you think you’ll just become who you used to be?’

*I don’t want to become who I used to be.*

‘Wait a minute,’ Jack said, smirking, ‘is this just you trying to work off pre-plan jitters or something? Is this your version of some kind of deep and meaningful? Because now is really not the best time.’

Gwyn ground his teeth together, Jack could see the muscles working in his jaw.

‘To be blunt, I know August’s torture methods. I know how long he had you. And I can see the difference in you, since he let you go. How are those broken compulsions feeling?’

Jack told himself that he didn’t flinch, that he just...shifted, to get more comfortable.

‘There is seriously a time and a place for a conversation like this, and you think it’s now? Really? I...’ Jack squeezed his eyes shut, took a deep breath. ‘Alright, if you’re worried about the compulsions, I think I’m gonna be okay. Whatever blast of light you pushed through my head, and the time since then, and...seeing Makara, oddly, they’re really not at the front of my mind. As for

August and his torture methods, I have some bruises, I'm healing, and...*what?*'

Gwyn leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. His expression turned to a stony stubbornness that Jack was familiar with. It meant that Gwyn didn't buy it.

'No offense, Gwyn, but if you want me to hold it together, now's really not the time to tease out the many stories of why Jack's changed, okay? You told me *immediately* after I woke up after August's attack, that we don't have *time* for this, and I happen to agree with you. So what's going on? Really?'

Gwyn looked down at the maps, his shorthand, the small figures representing people who were willing to put their lives on the line. His eyes flickered over the physical manifestation of their plan.

'I can see that this is the best idea on the table, but it's...it's quite ruthless, Jack. Are you sure you can do this? To the man you love?'

'Firstly, the Nightmare King *isn't* the man I love. And secondly, the 'ruthless' parts of this plan – and really, just *part*, just one *part* – are necessary. So I'm sure.'

Mora wandered into the round table room, perhaps drawn by Jack's increasing agitation with Gwyn's line of questioning. She snuffled at his good side and then walked over to the wall, watching Jack calmly. Gwyn raised his eyebrows at her, grimaced.

'Are you sure she's okay? She is a Nightmare.'

'Yeah, she's fine,' Jack said tiredly. 'She's a friend. She's staying behind anyway, and she hasn't heard the plan. So, y'know, no need to be paranoid or anything.'

Gwyn sighed and gave Jack a look that made him uncomfortable. Gwyn never articulated his thoughts very well, but the looks said plenty as far as Jack was concerned. He felt like perhaps he should step back with the snarking, except that he was nervous, and kept waiting for Gwyn to shoot down his plan. When Gwyn *hadn't*, he became extremely worried that it was because it was 'the best they could make of a bad situation.'

'How long will it take? Before we...before we start?'

'I'll need a day to tell everyone,' Gwyn said.

'A day,' Jack echoed, swallowing.

'If this works, we'll have destabilised August's Court to a severe degree. That is when August is at his most dangerous. This doesn't stop if Pitch returns, and it certainly won't if we fail. You realise that, don't you?'

Jack almost said that he didn't expect to live that much longer, so it didn't matter to him; but his despair had no place in the conversation. Even if Jack was gone, the other Guardians would be affected, Pitch would be affected, whether rescued or not. Jack wanted to see this through.

'I still don't know whether I should throttle you that you went to see the Nain Rouge, and then *Makara*.'

'Leave Makara alone, he's really nice. We're friends now,' Jack said, smiling to himself. 'I really liked him. He's nothing at all like what I thought, from what the Nain Rouge said.'

Gwyn cleared his throat and tilted his head sideways.

‘You and Makara are friends?’ he said in confusion.

‘Uh, yeah, sure. He asked, and I like him. He’s really good company. I don’t know why you guys don’t visit him more. Even if he does look like a monster to everyone.’

‘Do you *know* what he does to people who lie to him?’ Gwyn said, eyes widening.

‘Well, I got the impression that it was super unpleasant. But he only seems to have major problems with people who lie to him on purpose, so why do that? Just don’t do it, and he’s great. He’s- Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘You befriended Pitch after he’d had the shadows removed. I’d never understood why. He still had the potential for great evil. Living shadows are not the only thing that make a person capable of malice and malevolence. And...when Pitch confided in me, he said the same. He didn’t understand why you kept coming back. But now I’m starting to think that you are interested in judging everyone on their own merits, and that perhaps you are uncommonly able to give people second chances.’

Jack nodded slowly. He didn’t know whether he agreed.

‘Do you think you can use the frost to make a convincing likeness of Pitch’s daughter based on the locket alone?’ Gwyn said, changing the subject.

Jack shivered, his fingers came up and traced the shape of the metal. He’d stared at the locket a lot since he’d had the idea.

‘The artist was good, and I’ve spent three centuries mostly hanging around kids. I think even if it’s not perfect, it’ll be effective. After all, Pitch hasn’t seen her actual face for god knows how many years. But he *has* seen the locket. He’ll know. If it works, he’ll make the connection.’

‘The Nightmare King threw the locket away,’ Gwyn warned, and Jack smiled darkly.

‘Well, he’s going to get it back.’

\*

Bunnymund arrived at the Workshop after Gwyn left. Jack saw him from one of the upper levels and left before Bunnymund noticed, not wanting to say hello. He’d gotten the impression that Bunnymund visited North often these days, to talk about...who knew? Jack didn’t care.

He paced in his room, anxious, wondering how long ‘a day’ meant to Gwyn, and how soon he would come back with everything suddenly on the line. Then, after Mora stepped in his path directly, impatient with his constant movement, he decided to go outside and start practicing for his part in the plan. Mora stayed behind. Since she’d come back, she visited Sandy far more often, and seemed less dependent on Jack’s presence. Jack thought it was for the best.

He was almost free of the noisy, chaotic building when Bunnymund stepped out and blocked him. Jack deliberately tried to step around him.

He paused when he felt a giant, gentle paw on his arm. He shook his arm away, breaking the contact. It felt itchy, unpleasant.

‘Jack, mate, can we talk?’ Bunnymund said. His body language was subdued, his whiskers close to his cheeks, instead of pushed out like they normally were.

Jack twirled his staff and then shook his head.

‘No, Bunnymund, I can’t. I’m busy.’

Bunnymund’s eyes widened, a glimpse of his familiar stubbornness came into view.

‘It’ll only take a minute, yeah?’ Bunnymund said.

Jack didn’t want to be drawn into a conversation where he felt obligated to defend himself or Pitch again. It wasn’t going to change what he was doing, and he didn’t have the energy to deal with it. Sorting things out with Bunnymund was so low on his list of priorities that he didn’t even want to stay and make small talk. He took a step around Bunnymund and shook his head in something like apology and dismissal.

‘I have training,’ he said automatically.

Jack froze when he felt gentle paw pads rest on the back of his shoulder, he moved away from the touch as his breathing escalated. It took all his energy not to turn and clock Bunnymund across the face with his staff. As it was, when he turned back, he was holding the staff in both hands and ready to attack. Bunnymund looked at him with surprise, and Jack swallowed at the sudden rise of his own fear. He forced himself to take one of the hands off his staff, move it out of attack position.

‘You have *training*?’ Bunnymund said, narrowing his eyes. ‘You? I’m sorry, but is there another Jack Frost in the Workshop?’

Jack stared at him, and Bunnymund, after a few seconds, shifted uncomfortably.

‘Jack, mate, are you okay?’

Jack laughed.

‘Don’t. Don’t ask me if I’m okay. You’re not okay. I’m not okay. But we’re doing fine, aren’t we, Bunny? Isn’t that what we do?’

Bunnymund looked down, he rubbed at the leg that the Nain Rouge had injured back in the gymnasium. The leg that Pitch had expended his golden light to heal. The leg that – if Jack looked at it too long – made unreasonable, prickly anger expand inside of him.

‘Yeah, mate, that’s what we do.’

He sounded unusually flat, the normal fire and fight missing from his voice. Jack frowned as he took in Bunnymund’s appearance. He was still wearing his weapons, but his fur looked dull. There was a sadness to the cast of his eyes, in the way that his ears hadn’t risen completely upright once since their encounter. Jack thinned his lips when he realised that the question that immediately came to mind was of all things; ‘Are you okay?’

‘Look at us,’ Jack said. ‘You the Guardian of Hope, me the Guardian of Fun. Apparently. I don’t know. I really have to train, though.’

Jack turned to leave, skin crawling at the idea that Bunnymund might try and reach out with a gentle paw again, but he didn’t. So Jack made his way down to the snowfields, wondering how Bunnymund, or any of the Guardians, would react if they were to learn what Jack was practicing, and why.

\*

Gwyn returned before sunrise the next morning. He was dressed in his armour, had each of his three bows with him, his quiver of arrows, and his sheathed sword. He was visibly keyed up, tapping his hand on his sword hilt. Jack wanted to ask him to stop, but he felt a jumbled up mess inside, and had to excuse himself twice to dry retch particles of frost into the air.

The last time he'd felt this level of dread, he'd been in a state close to panic attack lying on Pitch's bed, demanding that Pitch distract him and take his mind off things. That was before he could conceptualise just how disastrous things could become. To be so close to the execution of another plan which might not work left him in a constant state of tension. It didn't even help knowing that the Nain Rouge was no longer a part of the Unseelie Court. He now feared August just as much as Pitch had always wanted him to, maybe more. Pitch used to say fear would keep him alive, but he knew from previous experience that fear could just as easily put him in harm's way.

'Why are you so nervous? I thought you did this kind of thing all the time?' Jack said, and Gwyn paused and then his fingers resumed tapping again, louder than ever.

'The stakes are high. The Nightmare King has not only been a problem for the Guardians, but also for the fae. He has destabilised our Courts. Before his arrival, everything was relatively stable and peaceful between us. His arrival, and with it the alien, malicious force he brought with him, tilted everything in favour of the chaotic, the unbalanced. It changed not only the human world, but our world too, yet we could find no effective weapons against the shadows themselves.

'This is not just about getting Pitch back; that is your priority, it isn't mine. To move so offensively against the Unseelie Court, as we are about to, is literally unheard of. We do not show such open aggression towards each other. It will reflect upon me as King. I am putting the lives of fae in danger, and we may have nothing more to show for it than an aggravated Nightmare King who resists our attack and retaliates. It will change the course of our futures as fae, for what it means to rule in a Court, for what is permissible when interacting with our brethren. But this decisive blow *must* be made. For if we can vanquish the Nightmare King, truly vanquish him, and eliminate enough of these living shadows...this too, will change the course of our future as fae.

'There is no way in which this will not change everything for us. I am an old hand at battles, at war. Not this.'

'You never wanted to be King, did you?' Jack said, adjusting the scarf yet again. It had to stay in place. He was terrified it wouldn't work; that the Nightmare King would be so powerful that one look would tell him everything he needed to know, if August hadn't already. Or, alternatively, he was horrified that August's compulsion – the one he barely felt anymore – would rebuild itself within his head and he'd succumb. He felt the latter was less likely. Seeing Makara and sleeping for four days seemed to have weakened the broken compulsions in his mind.

'No, I never wanted to be King. I never even wanted to be a General, but my family demanded it,' Gwyn laughed softly, but there was no cheer in the sound, only an old, dark bitterness. 'I was always better at taking orders. I wished for perhaps enough status to suggest strategic improvements to a tactician – a Lieutenant for example, but that was all. But, apparently, I am quite competent at being a General. The downside to having a centre that represented triumph for so long is that – for a time – I was deft at anything I turned my hand towards that required a measure of triumph. And so General I became. That was not such a bad thing, but it's a lot of responsibility.'

'And you don't like that?' Jack said, and Gwyn looked up, eyes a murky blue.

‘Should I?’

Jack remembered how much more ‘himself’ Gwyn had seemed at the Wild Hunt. He’d been more relaxed, easier with the others, even managed to make something approximating small talk with the other fae. He celebrated the diversity of the fae around him, and it was the first time Jack had realised that Gwyn had more to his personality than ‘stodgy, disapproving King.’

‘So everything’s ready?’ Jack said quietly, looking outside at the dark sky, unnerved by the Workshop, far quieter than usual at such an early hour. Usually it was buzzing with energy and noise, but now all the yeti – bar the sentries – were asleep, and North had disappeared to spend time with Bunnymund down with the reindeer.

‘First, Peloton will tell me that the Nightmare King has exited the Unseelie Court and is no longer covered by the protection of their wards, and then we move in. I will bring in the rest of our team of soldiers to set up the weapons. And then it will play out however it may.’

‘That’s only if the Nightmare King goes to that cave he’s been frequenting beneath the Unseelie Court first,’ Jack said. ‘He could go anywhere.’

‘Peloton says his movements, while not entirely predictable, have a pattern to them.’

‘Well, here’s hoping he follows that pattern when Albion attacks and blocks the main exit to the Unseelie Court. Though blocking the exit is hardly going to matter to anyone who can teleport.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said quietly. His fingers drummed incessantly on his armour, over and over again. Each click of his fingernails against metal made Jack’s fingers tighten.

‘If I go for a quick walk, you can find me, right?’ Jack said, and Gwyn’s fingers stopped moving, as though just realising how annoying it might be. He nodded curtly.

Jack walked up the stairs towards his room. He was only ten steps away when he heard the tapping start up again, a constant representation of Gwyn’s tension.

Mora was in his room, leg cocked up in rest, her head drooping. He walked over and she roused, swinging her head towards him and nosing his chest, sniffing out the strands of his fear. Jack let the cleaner fear she created move through him and he lowered his forehead to hers, feeling tendrils of black sand brush against him as she woke properly.

‘Hey girl,’ Jack whispered. ‘Sorry you can’t come with me today. You stay safe with Sandy.’

She pushed against him and Jack stumbled backwards, smiling.

Nervously, he walked to the room next door, placing his hand on the doorknob and turning it. The door swung open and he walked into Pitch’s room. It was lit only by the window outside. He could see the outline of the armchair in the corner. The rumpled sheets. The obscenely large axe wrapped up on the mattress. Mora followed, walking around the room, nosing the coffee table where Pitch kept his journal, before settling next to the armchair.

Jack leaned his staff against the wall and knelt next to the bed, ignoring the pain of the action, and placed both of his arms on the mattress, resting his head. He breathed in deep, closed his eyes. He could still smell the remnants of cinnamon, of sandalwood and other woody spices, of a familiar scent that was purely Pitch.

He trembled, the weight of what he was about to do pressing into his spine and forcing him to fist his hands into the sheets.

He was scared the plan wouldn't work. But worse, alongside that was a horrible knowledge that if it *did* work, he couldn't tell Pitch about everything that had happened. That, for the first time since meeting him, the scarf around his torso would allow him to keep something secret. But August was right. It would destroy Pitch to know what had happened to Jack. August had turned him into a pawn, used him in a way that would turn him into a force of pain in Pitch's life, if he ever told Pitch about what had happened.

August was so desperate for Pitch to know, for Jack to tell him, that Jack planned on withholding the information for as long as he could. Forever, if he had to. But the idea of doing that, when the only person he could ever imagine talking to about it was *Pitch*...

Jack swallowed around the queasiness, locked his body against the trembling.

He would do what he had to do. If everything worked, Pitch would need time to recover from being possessed by the shadows. He would be in enough pain. There was no way Jack was going to add to that.

Jack stroked the sheets with one hand, longing stirring loud inside him. Minutes passed and Jack didn't look up when he heard footsteps, didn't have the energy to feel embarrassed about Gwyn catching him kneeling against Pitch's bed, Mora watching nearby.

But the footsteps were louder and larger than Gwyn's, and Jack felt a giant presence kneel beside him, a hand touch his back so gently that it hardly aggravated the wounds it rested against. North smelled like reindeer and baking. Jack stilled, but didn't move. He didn't mind the hand on his back, oddly, not when he felt like he would shake apart without an anchor.

'Anyone here, Jack...anyone in this whole world, would be lucky to have someone love them the way you love him.'

Jack didn't reply, he blinked at a curve of fabric in his line of vision. He didn't think North was right. How did love make anyone lucky? It made people sacrifice themselves in ways they probably shouldn't. It hurt a lot.

'You must have shed many tears over him,' North said, as soothingly as if he was trying to calm down his lead reindeer. *Maybe he has been*, Jack thought. North always came back gentler, easier, when he'd spent time with the reindeer.

Jack shook his head in response. No tears. If he started, he wouldn't stop.

'None, actually,' he said.

North paused, then his hand moved up and splayed over Jack's shoulder blades.

'Jack,' he breathed, shocked, 'You mean you haven't grieved? For what you have lost?'

Jack shifted, lifted himself up and looked at North, narrowing his eyes.

'I've lost nothing. I'm getting him back. I mean, if this doesn't work then...maybe. But otherwise...'

North didn't say anything for a long time, in that way that meant that he disagreed with everything that Jack had just said, but wasn't sure how to go about saying it. Jack rocked back on his heels slowly, and then stood up.

'Let it go, North. I'll deal with it when I have the time to deal with it.'



‘Will you, Jack? I know a little about you, and what I am knowing is that you are good at not looking at things. You are using your limited time as a way of hiding. I know this. You are not planning on dealing with any of this.’

Jack picked up his staff and rubbed fingers into his eyes, trying to wake himself up, ignoring what North had said.

‘You were not going to say goodbye, were you?’ North said heavily.

Jack resisted the urge to say something he’d regret, because he didn’t want North to know how much it irritated him, these expectations. He didn’t want to have to say goodbye. For a very long time, he hadn’t needed to concern himself with things like this and he didn’t like it now. There were – he had realised some time ago – some odd benefits to not having to be accountable to anyone due to invisibility and neglect.

‘Then I am also not going to be saying goodbye,’ North said. He reached out a hand to ruffle Jack’s hair, and Jack flinched backwards. He wrenched the wounds at his side and broken flesh stretched and tore. He hissed and bent over sharp, breath-stealing pain, hand moving up to his ribs. It was only after seconds passed that he realised he’d exposed too much, showed too much of himself. He straightened carefully. Mora shifted by Pitch’s armchair, sensitive to the sudden increase of fear within the room.

‘How many secrets are you keeping, Jack?’ North said sadly.

‘I’m gonna go see how Gwyn’s doing,’ Jack said.

‘When you come back, we are going to have a talk,’ North said with grim promise, as Jack stepped around him.

Jack grit his teeth together.

*Don’t count on it.*

\*

Jack wasn’t sure how everyone was communicating with Gwyn. He was certain it wasn’t telepathy, because Gwyn had never shown an aptitude for that. Perhaps it was some kind of spell, or magic, that allowed him to hear people’s messages even though they were communicating from a distance. All at once Gwyn stepped away from the wall, stopped tapping his fingers and raised one hand to his ear, stared off, concentrating hard. His face darkened and he looked at Jack after lowering his hand.

‘We’re close.’

Jack’s hand clenched on his staff, the other wrapped around the locket at his neck. Gwyn picked up his quiver of arrows and slung it around his back, took his longbow up in hand.

‘When I teleport you, this is going to happen *fast*. You know that? We have one shot at this plan, and one shot only. Even with August and Ash distracted, the Nightmare King is still more powerful than all of us.’

Jack hoped Gwyn didn’t think he was good at rallying pep talks, because he *sucked* at them.

‘Pitch once told me that everyone has a weakness,’ Jack said, taking a deep breath. ‘When I wanted to defeat the Nain Rouge, he told me I couldn’t do it, because even if I knew her weaknesses I

wasn't the right person for the job. But I know Pitch's weaknesses. And I know the Nightmare King's weaknesses; at least some of them. And I can exploit *both*. If we fail, today, it's not gonna be because of me, Gwyn. This is my plan, remember? I know how fast we have to act. I'm ready.'

'You're still injured, and the Nightmare King knows that you're terrified of being possessed by the shadows.'

'Yeah? Good for him. We have the weapons, and I'm pretty good at ignoring pain. Are you *stalling*? Is this you stalling?' Jack said. 'Can we just get it over and done with already?'

Gwyn ground his teeth together. Then he paused and stared off into the distance again, hand moving up to his ear once more. His eyes widened, and his lips thinned.

'Now,' Gwyn said shortly.

Jack had just enough time to flash Gwyn a nervous grin that he didn't feel, before Gwyn teleported them both out of North's Workshop.

\*

Being used to his own method of teleportation, Gwyn already had his longbow drawn back, taut, the arrow ready to go as soon as they arrived.

Jack landed on his feet and Gwyn sent him to the floor, sweeping his legs. Jack's flash of outrage, burst of pain was quelled when he saw the black robes of the Nightmare King *right there*, shadows swirling around him, Nightmare Men clinging to the walls. He was halfway through taunting the small group of soldiers who were setting up the weapons that North had made. A small figure with long ears and a donkey's tail lay prone and unseeing on the floor. *Peloton*.

'Gwyn, how lovely of you to join us,' the Nightmare King said, his voice echoing in the small, dark corridor that led up into the Unseelie Court. 'I suppose you think you're *clever*. And look, you brought a tiny frost spirit with you.'

Jack gasped when living shadows crept along the floor and pushed threatening tendrils at him. He felt the stir of Augus' compulsion within his mind, but it stayed dormant. It was nothing more than an odd feeling that his life might be improved if he told the Nightmare King everything. Jack hoped the scarf was working.

Jack started unlooping the necklace holding the locket from his neck. This part had to be done quickly.

He pushed himself up. He heard the sharp, thick whine of an arrow hissing through the air. The first one was deflected as Gwyn had suspected it would be, but the Nightmare King didn't know how fast Gwyn could draw a second arrow. The second whine finished with a fleshy, heavy *thock!*

The Nightmare King *screamed*.

Jack stood up and ran towards the direction of the sound. Soldiers were shouting for Gwyn, and Jack knew he was withdrawing his sword, getting ready to charge the weapons with his weaker form of golden light.

The Nightmare King was pinned to the wall of the cave, longbow arrow pushed through the flesh of his shoulder. The metal of Pitch's sword on the arrow point made by the Glasera dwarves kept him pinned more than the wooden shaft ever could. The arm beneath the arrow that pierced his flesh hung limp. Jack felt a rush of adrenaline and triumph. He *knew* it. He knew the metal of that

sword would come in handy. The Nightmare King reached for the arrow with his other hand, staring pure, venomous hate at Jack with a face that wasn't his to use.

Jack got within striking distance, noticed the way the Nightmare King shied from his staff. He ducked under the arm that the Nightmare King struck out with, trying to grab him. Jack rose up on tiptoes, quickly looping the necklace around the Nightmare King's neck.

He staggered backwards as the Nightmare King screamed again, body sagging as though the necklace weighed far more than it actually did. He reached up to tear it off, tugged clumsily and hard, golden eyes wide, furious and confused. He tugged just as hard as August had when he'd tried to remove it from Jack's neck, and with the same result. The necklace cut into skin, pushing more of the sword metal that the shadows found so repugnant into flesh.

'What have you *done*?' the Nightmare King shouted, fingers letting go of the necklace in a spasm, as though it burnt like fire.

'Gwyn, we need the light! *Gwyn!*'

Jack swept his staff along the ground, fending off the shadows that rushed towards him. The metal in the staff kept them at bay, only just. But every time he turned, they were creeping up on him again.

'*Come on, Gwyn!*' Jack shouted.

A glow of golden light burst into the air, followed by the building, impossible hum of the first of the light weapons. The Nightmare King, practically paralysed by the arrow in his shoulder, the necklace hanging like silver filament around his neck, stared with wide eyes at the weapon.

*So you didn't know, you didn't know. Oh god please let this work, please let this work, please let him survive the li-*

The beam of light struck the Nightmare King square in the chest. Jack didn't know what he expected, only that he hoped against hope that it would work. The Nightmare King stiffened, his body limned with a halo of gold. A rushing hum, as ominous as a stirred beehive, filled the room. Jack flew backwards, staring at the blank eyes of the Nightmare King, and then his entire gut turned to cold, hard stone when he saw an impossible number of Nightmare Men start streaming from that paralysed body.

*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit that's a lot of-*

'GWYN!'

'I'm on it!' Gwyn shouted, and there were more bursts of golden light. The beam from the first weapon kept streaming into the Nightmare King. Then the high-tech snowball weapon that Jack was proudest of, whined shrill, then shrieked an unearthly echo that hurt Jack's ears.

Twenty beams of golden light scattered into the underground cave, and there was a sudden whoop from one of the soldiers, because the Nightmare Men – the most powerful of all of the living shadows – were no longer safe. The second weapon was spun slowly on its axis, and the multiple golden beams of light sliced through the shadows, turning them instantly into wisps of smoke, turning the world to golden sparks.

The beam from the first weapon died down as Gwyn worked at keeping the other fuelled with golden light. The Nightmare King sagged. Jack's breath left him. Could it have worked already? So soon?

The Nightmare King raised his head and glowered at Jack.

'I suppose you think you're *clever*,' he hissed.

'Kind of, yeah,' Jack said, chancing a grin. 'Hurts, doesn't it? The metal? Gwyn's got more arrows if you think about moving. Do you like my staff, by the way? Kept you at bay, this piece of wood. I've been nightmare free for ages.'

'Free of *my* nightmares, maybe,' the Nightmare King said, grinning jagged teeth up at Jack. In response, Jack's whole body froze. He was meant to be focusing, not drawn into this perverted form of banter. 'But you've always been prone, haven't you? Dreaming of your dear, fickle lover being torn away from you? How helpless you were?'

The words were bitten out around the pain, and Jack only just managed to hide the swell of relief. He had, indeed, had nightmares about those things, but it was August – more often than not – who pushed his way into his bad dreams. For the Nightmare King not to have mentioned it meant the scarf was working.

'*Jack!*' Gwyn shouted at him. 'Focus!'

*Focus, right.*

He drew frost particles from the air. He knew it would drain him, but he had to do it. He didn't need the locket anymore, he'd stared at it enough. He knew how to build a children's shape out of frost, he knew what the lunar alphabet looked like, he could make a dress simply enough. It was, in the end, surprisingly simple to craft Seraphina out of frost.

He stepped aside, let her walk forward. Pitch's perfect, lost daughter.

The hand that the Nightmare King had been using to try and grasp the necklace again stilled, trembled once, then dropped. A strangled gasp came out of his throat. And, perhaps because she was a Seraphina made of frost, or perhaps because so many Nightmare Men had left his body already, or perhaps because the Nightmare King was so weakened by the metal that had once been Pitch's sword blade; Jack saw it. He blinked twice to make sure it wouldn't go away, and then he knew what he was seeing was real and the swell of anticipation nearly made him sick.

It was the first glimpse of Pitch he'd seen in so long. A Pitch that stared at Seraphina as though she was *actually* alive again, a Pitch who didn't seem to realise she was made of frost, because – as Jack had planned – just seeing her upright, with moving facial features, hands that could reach out, a dress scrawled with the lunar alphabet, tapped into an old and desperate grief. Jack's heart twisted, his body shook with exhaustion and horror at himself, but he wouldn't have done this to Pitch if he hadn't been certain it would work.

Jack realised that the Nightmare King was still in there, still fighting back. It was incredible how quickly those shadows could overtake Pitch's eyes and turn them cold and cruel. But Pitch pushed back again, reached out for the longbow arrow and with a shaking hand pulled it forcefully out of his shoulder. He collapsed to the floor, one arm catching his body, eyes never moving away from Seraphina's.

'Come on, Pitch,' Jack whispered. 'Come on, you pushy bastard. *Come on.*'

The fact that Pitch had been able to move the bloodied arrow meant that he was there, somewhere. Pitch could touch the metal; the Nightmare King couldn't.

Jack made Seraphina step backwards, and Pitch strained to reach her, shadows coiling out of his

body and surging back in through his spine, the back of his head, with a punishing force. Pitch dropped his head, and the Nightmare King looked up, stared at nothing.

‘Do you think you will *ever* be rid of us?’ the Nightmare King hissed, and Jack flinched at the promise in that voice, before realising that the Nightmare King was talking to *Pitch*. ‘Are you feeling something like *hope*, Kozmotis? Do you *dare*? I thought we taught you better than *that*.’

Jack felt a wave of exhaustion move through him, weaken his whole body. His knees started to buckle and he gritted his teeth against it. *Not now. Not now, damn it.*

The Nightmare King dropped his head again, his body shifted and changed as the shadows battled Pitch within. And then, unbelievably, more Nightmare Men were pushed out of the Nightmare King’s body, Pitch winning whatever fight he was experiencing within himself. Jack shivered to see them.

He raised his staff into the air. It was working. It was w-

Jack shrieked as something malevolent and huge slammed into his legs. He stumbled backwards and fell, staff skidding out of his fingers as pain fractured his mind. *Shadows, Nightmare Men, don’t-*

But this wasn’t the Nain Rouge’s threat at the gymnasium, where only a tendril pushed in, teasing. This was commitment. The shadows tunnelled into him through clothing and flesh, wrapped hard around his skeleton. He gagged on air, his spine bowed backwards. He became aware of screaming and he knew that he was the one doing it. His hands grasped at nothing.

He rolled onto his side as the shadow pushed with a snakelike strike up his spine, heading straight towards his mind.

‘GWYN!’

More pain. Blackness crested over his vision. He screamed something else. He heard a high-pitched whine, thought it was himself. He didn’t know he could make a noise that high. There was something in his mind and he-

Jack was slammed into silence when the golden beam of light hit his body. It was an impossible heat, a stripe of fire that sliced across his back. He forgot to breathe, had no air left for screaming, and the shadows within him recoiled violently, treating his body with a casual disregard that, along with his own numbing fatigue, was killing him. He knew it even as he got his mind back and the shadows left.

He wouldn’t survive this. His body was failing.

The beam of light moved off his body. He saw glittering beams shift over him, catching the escaping Nightmare Men before they could leave. He saw blackness beyond that, the natural shadows of the cave.

His breathing was a hoarse rasp, a wheeze on every exhale.

*Get up*, he told himself. *Get up*.

He rolled over, reached blindly for his staff. He saw Pitch lying on his back, staring unseeing up at the ceiling, like Peloton.

Jack staggered upright and ran over to Pitch as quickly as he could, dropping down to his knees and

letting go of his staff because it hardly mattered anymore. He had no frost left, nothing but a shaky cold that wouldn't last much longer. He looked at Pitch's body, smaller and slighter than the Nightmare King's. He saw a smudge of embroidery through the darkness clinging to Pitch's robes and he knew it was him. Even his eyes were different, blank though they were, staring up at the ceiling.

Jack clumsily straddled him, pushed two clumsy fingers to the pulse point at his neck. A weak pulse fluttered, a small, winged insect. Blood oozed thick and red from his shoulder.

'Pitch,' he whispered. 'Pitch, please, is it you? Is it you? Come on, come back. It's okay. Everything's different now. Come back. *Pitch*, come back to me, please, *please*.'

Nothing for seconds that lasted too long, then Pitch gasped and blinked, his eyes focused, gaze rolling from the ceiling to Jack's face. Jack thought his heart was going to claw its way out of his chest. And when Pitch smiled at him – *smiled*, guileless and open, as though he could hardly believe that Jack was there, a splintering moved through his heart.

Pitch reached up weakly and the back of his hand bumped gently against his face.

'Jack,' he whispered, and Jack nodded, couldn't stop nodding. 'I've missed you.'

Jack could tell that his own breathing was becoming hyperventilation, and didn't care. There was grey mist at the edges of his vision, and he didn't care. It was *Pitch*, it was actually him. Jack moved his fingers away from that weak, rapid pulse and curled his hand around Pitch's clammy cheek.

'I have something of yours,' Pitch said, curling his hand up over the back of Jack's neck.

'Y-you do?' Jack said, confused.

Pitch pulled him down into a kiss. His mouth was open, but his lips didn't move. And Jack blinked at those gold eyes, shocked and nervous and-

A small thread of pure cold wound its way from Pitch's mouth and pushed into Jack's.

A cold that suffused his skin and flesh. It was familiar and ice-blue and smelled like snow about to fall and icicles forming. The thread thickened to a rope of energy that flooded between them, coiling to find its way back to its rightful home, and Jack swallowed at it hungrily, chest heaving with slow, overwhelmed sobs as he stared into Pitch's eyes.

His energy, his power, more than he'd ever suspected, more than he knew possibly existed, it was returning. Somehow Pitch had absorbed it from the Nain Rouge. Somehow, Pitch had kept it safe for him, or buried it so deep that the Nightmare King couldn't find it or use it.

The grey mist at edges of his vision receded, and his core of power flushed chill and then became the strong, limitless realm of ice it had always been. And alongside it, the promise of snowstorms and iced windowpanes and diamond-dust glittering and rainbow refractions of sunlight. It was frozen lakes and oceans, ice flowers, glaciers, ice-storms, the first snow and the heaviest snows, curlicues of frost moving up telephone poles and down statues.

Jack started to laugh against Pitch's lips, the hand at Pitch's face easily, absently made frost creep over his skin. He saw blue and white all around him, a nimbus of light that saturated his body and spilled from it; a chill, blue glow in the centre of the darkness and all of it flooding forth from Pitch's lips, pressed against his cold ones.

When the last of Jack's soul had pressed itself through Jack's body, Pitch broke the kiss and Jack leaned back, all traces of shaking gone, strength that had once been a distant memory reinforcing him once more. He felt as though a circle had been completed inside of himself. Even though he'd been leaking energy for weeks, for months, his soul had still been waiting for the rest of itself. Sealed and whole, he felt incredible. He exhaled a breath of laughter that was rich with particles of frost.

'I really needed that,' Jack said, stupidly. 'You saved me again. It's getting to be a habit of yours.'

Pitch smiled a reply.

Gwyn came over to their side as Jack brushed away the frost on Pitch's cheek. Gwyn looked down at Pitch and frowned.

'Jack,' Gwyn said grimly, breaking the spell. 'He doesn't remember. He doesn't remember any of it.'

Jack stared at Gwyn in confusion, and then met Pitch's eyes, took in his blank, innocent expression. *Oh no.* There was something dazed on Pitch's face. This was not someone who remembered being possessed by the shadows. This was not someone tortured by the weight of his life, his sacrifices.

'Remember?' Pitch said uncertainly. 'Remember what, exactly?'

'No,' Jack whispered, as Pitch's eyes widened with slow horror. It was the look of someone receiving too much information too fast, and none of it *good*. Pitch's face became drawn, then pale. He shivered underneath Jack's legs, and then began to shake violently.

Pitch suddenly pushed himself up on his elbows, looking past Jack, and Jack realised what he was searching for. He spun, an inarticulate cry falling from his mouth as he saw frost-Seraphina still standing there, stronger than ever now that Jack's powers were back.

*No, he can't see her, he can't see her!*

He opened his palm and clenched it, causing the frost to dissolve, but it was too late.

Pitch had seen her. And then he'd seen Jack take her out of existence.

Pitch jerked as though shot. The hoarse sound of pain he made split the room, was barely human. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head. He collapsed limp, unconscious.

'Pitch,' Jack whispered, horrified. 'Pitch, no, Pitch, you-'

'We *have* to get out of here,' Gwyn said, fingers up at his ear. 'Augus has found out. We have to go *now*.'

With that, they all dissolved into light, leaving the cavern behind.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Hollowed Out,' Jack realises that he isn't the only one who has been changed by recent events, and also... that perhaps Pitch isn't as happy about a huge, freaking battle-axe as Gwyn maybe thought he would be. Also, PITCH IS

BACK!



# Hollowed Out

## Chapter Notes

Omg I still can't believe how this is going, the feedback, the kudos, the \*comments.\*  
Honestly, it's just wonderful.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Back at the Workshop, Jack expected Pitch to wake up straight away. He'd hovered, annoyingly close, as North rushed over and soldiers fussed nearby and weapons were dismantled. Pitch was checked over for residual injuries. The wound at his shoulder was bloody, but the arrow hadn't hit bone or done any major damage, and was patched up and bandaged. Across his chest was a starburst of bruising from where the beam of light had hit. The back of his neck needed cleaning. Blood had trickled as a result of the silvery chain cutting in.

Then Pitch was taken, limp and pallid, directly up to the room that North had allocated to him, all that time ago.

Gwyn talked with soldiers about who would stand watch, in case Pitch was still partly possessed. Jack lost track of the conversation. He couldn't *think*. Pitch was back in North's Workshop. Jack couldn't scrape the sound of pain out of his head Pitch had made, when he'd seen frost-Seraphina. It echoed, twisting up his chest.

Jack was feeling more than he'd felt in a long time. He was dazed. He could feel the imprints the shadows had left inside of him, like a glare behind his eyes that turned dark every time he blinked. He could feel power swirling, giving him the energy to experience a multitude of thoughts and feelings, each a whirl of snow inside of him, pulling his attention in different directions.

Everyone expected Pitch to wake up almost straight away. Minutes passed as people waited, impatiently, and then hours dragged after that. Jack wondered how it had worked the first time, when the Nain Rouge had sucked the shadows out of him. Had he fallen into a coma then? No one had been there to look after him, no one knew, Jack had never pushed to find out. He realised he should have. Pitch had indicated he'd spent *years* in his lair under the Each Uisge's compulsion.

How long would he be shaking off the influence of the Nightmare Men this time?

North came out soon after Pitch had been settled in his bed, and he'd tried to engage Jack in conversation. It hadn't gone very well.

'Jack! Your bruise and your eye, they've healed! You are...' North paused and his eyes widened in the wonder that was so characteristic of him. 'What *happened*? You look *alive*.'

'Pitch,' Jack said absently, staring at the closed door and hoping Pitch would wake up soon, any minute now, *soon*. 'He must've absorbed it from the Nain Rouge, I guess. He gave it back.'

'This is *wonderful*!'

'Yep. Guess so, hey, did Pitch show any signs of waking up? I should be in there, right?'

'Jack, maybe you should be coming with me. You have not been looked over yet, have you?'

Jack thought about the padding around his side, he thought about the bite wounds which hadn't yet healed, even with his power coursing through him again. He thought about how North couldn't see that, *ever*. He would ask questions, and Jack couldn't give him answers. Then he thought about how much he wanted to leave Pitch's side before he woke up.

'Maybe later, North.'

'Jack, Pitch would want you to look after yourself,' North said, and Jack scowled. That was a tactic North hadn't tried before, and it made a flare of self-consciousness rise within him. He realised that Pitch probably *would* want that, but he'd never been very good at listening to Pitch either.

'Look, I'm *fine*. But he can lecture me when he wakes up,' Jack said. He stared at North, and after a minute had passed, North heaved a huge sigh. He started to reach out and touch Jack's shoulder, thought the better of it, turned and walked away.

Gwyn came out of the room about four hours later. He didn't look remotely surprised to see Jack there.

'Do you feel strange, after being hit by the light?' Gwyn said brusquely.

Jack shrugged.

'I feel like I'm not possessed anymore, does that help? It just hurt. That's all, really. I have my power back, the rest of my soul. I feel like I don't have to sleep, which is a real novelty.'

'But you still don't feel like yourself, do you?' Gwyn said, eyes narrowing. Jack shifted uncomfortably. Gwyn could be astute, sometimes.

'I just want him to wake up, okay? How did the rest of the battle go?'

Gwyn smiled once, darkly.

'Albion stayed behind long after I suggested he retreat, since – you can imagine – the patriarch of the Atlantic Ocean doesn't always listen to me. But, also, once started, he is like any wave of the ocean; he cannot stop until he has found a shoreline to break upon. And at that point, he carries the full force of the sea behind him. Augus has had his hands full. Ondine retreated quickly, there have been some fatalities. Rumours are spreading that the Nightmare King has been defeated.'

Jack swallowed. They had defeated the Nightmare King. There were still more living shadows to find and destroy with the weapons, but Pitch himself had been restored.

But the methods they'd used disturbed him. He remembered how Pitch's eyes had widened when he'd seen frost-Seraphina. The sudden, twisting of his face that showed a vulnerability and loss Jack had never seen before. Not ever, even when he'd talked about his daughter.

*I did that, I caused that.*

'It was a good plan,' Gwyn said, as though he could tell what Jack was thinking. 'It worked. It made him fight off the shadows, it allowed him to work with us and fight back. That matters.'

*Will he still want to fight now that she's gone again?*

'I am going to be here a lot, until Pitch wakes up and shows no signs of having any residual shadows within him. I think it won't be a problem, but of course we need to be sure. The watches will be divided between myself and North. Can you talk to me about his robes? They don't

respond to the golden light, and yet it looks like shadow is still cloaking most of the embroidery. What causes that?’

‘I have no idea,’ Jack said, tipping his staff to the wall and watching frost spirals shoot across it. ‘We never talked about it, really. It just seemed to take a while for the darkness to leave. But it’s not earth fabric, is it? It came from space, like he did. So maybe it reflects some kind of inner conflict or something? It seemed to respond to his state of mind. So I don’t know how it works. But whatever it is, it never tried to possess Pitch again, it just receded as Pitch became more like...whoever he was supposed to be.’

‘He told me that they hollow themselves out for the darkness,’ Gwyn said speculatively. ‘Perhaps they are given clothing that reflects their internal state of balance. In such a case, you could trust a warrior who shows full embroidery, but the one who does not perhaps needs more time before being trusted out in the battlefield.’

Jack withdrew his staff when he noticed the frost was starting to get out of control. He felt strangely more powerful than he had before, but that couldn’t be, could it? Surely it was just that he wasn’t used to having his soul back and whole again. He just needed time.

‘Well, that makes sense,’ Jack said, ‘I don’t know, but it matches with how the embroidery revealed itself in the time that I knew him. Once he could make the golden light again, you could pretty much see the embroidery completely. Imagine that though, having clothing that reflected how balanced you were on the inside. Well, I suppose I’m going to have to watch myself around him again. Things were...tense, when we first started encountering each other.’

‘And then there’s the fact that you paraded his dead daughter in front of him, and then took her away again,’ Gwyn said, so blunt that it took Jack’s breath away. He felt sick, and then forced himself to look away from Gwyn’s critical, blue gaze. Gwyn was right to be blunt. Jack had done what he needed to do and he *knew* that. But he didn’t feel so good. The sound Pitch had made echoed in his head, over and over again. *He* had caused that.

‘He’ll understand,’ Jack said, wishing he sounded more confident than he felt. ‘If we can just talk about it, maybe. Once, he told me that we did the right thing, locking him down underground with the shadows. I was upset that we did that to him – guilty – and he told me it was the right thing to do. Maybe he’ll, I mean- We saved him didn’t we? He asked me to, and didn’t I do that?’

Jack stared at the frost spirals underneath his feet and swallowed.

‘He asked me to save him. I didn’t know what else to do.’

‘Then let us hope he understands,’ Gwyn said, the hard edges in his voice softening.

‘I just want him to wake up,’ Jack said.

‘We all do,’ Gwyn sighed. ‘You’re going to be here a lot, aren’t you? You know you can’t do anything for him, just standing here?’

‘I don’t have anything else to do,’ Jack said quietly. ‘I don’t want to do anything else. I’ll just...wait.’

Gwyn looked at Jack like he wanted to disapprove, or lecture, and then his shoulders sank down and he shook his head.

‘North and I are taking watches over Pitch until he awakens, but I don’t think you should, Jack. There’s no easy way to say this, but I’m not sure you should be the first thing he sees when he

wakes up, after what just happened. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

Jack's heart twisted inside of himself, twisted itself into knots.

*I did what I had to do, didn't I?*

'Yeah,' Jack said, voice small. 'Yeah, I...I understand.'

\*

A day passed. Another. Pitch didn't wake up.

Jack divided his time between standing near Pitch's door, or standing in his own room, leaning against Mora. Pitch had shown no signs of rousing, but Gwyn said that his colour was getting better, and his pulse was stronger.

North kept trying to get Jack to talk, and Jack wished he would just give up. There was nothing Jack wanted to talk about. Now that he wasn't at risk of dying, he was actually having to consciously evade conversation. He didn't want to talk about what he'd been through, what had happened, what Augus had done, how it had affected him, what the future looked like. He was constantly aware of the scarf, but no longer checked to see if it was still bound to him. He knew it was a part of him now; it would stay in place.

He'd been seeing Sandy less. Reassembling Mora so quickly had taxed him. He was cashing in a lengthy sleep debt, and when he wasn't bringing good dreams he was almost always sleeping up on his fluffy clouds of sand.

On the second day, Gwyn came out of the room and closed the door gently behind him, then leaned against it.

'You must be on your guard,' Gwyn said. 'Albion has finally withdrawn his forces, and Augus has retaliated already. The Dullahan has attacked one of our strongholds. Augus is – reports suggest – furious at our having defeated the Nightmare King and secured Pitch.'

Jack shivered at the thought of an angry Augus, one who wasn't constantly charming and in control.

'That could be good though, right? Won't it make him more likely to misstep? You told me that people who are out of control make stupid decisions.'

'A desperate, vengeful Augus is a very dangerous thing indeed. You may have your powers back, but you aren't safe. None of us are. I suspect this will not be ended until he is stripped of his powers and his status as King. Again, not something that usually happens amongst the Seelie and Unseelie Courts. I rather feel he has forced my hand in this.'

'If you need my help...' Jack said, and then left the sentence hanging. He didn't know if Gwyn would want his help anymore.

'Of course,' Gwyn said, and then tapped on the door behind him several times with restless fingers. 'As it stands, I just came out to warn you about Augus. I thought you might want to know.'

'Vigil getting boring, huh?' Jack said, smiling, and Gwyn sighed.

'I'm not good at watching unconscious people remain unconscious.'

Jack almost offered to take over, and then stopped himself at the last minute. He wanted to be there, so badly, when Pitch woke up. But Gwyn was right. Perhaps the first face Pitch saw when he awoke again – memories intact – was not Jack's.

\*

On the fourth day, Jack heard a commotion in Pitch's room and leapt out of bed, where he'd been trying to think of a way to get North off his back and mostly failing. There was shouting; Pitch, then Gwyn, followed by the clatter of heavy metal. Jack froze, wary. His first instinct was to rush into Pitch's room, but his body had locked down. The shouting had sounded menacing.

*'Where is he?!'*

Jack's heart beat mercilessly. He was already backing up into the wall when his door flew open.

Pitch charged in, battle-axe unwrapped, gleaming, held in two hands. Jack didn't even have time to draw a breath, to make a sound of shock. Pitch swung it over his back and then *slammed* it into the wood beside Jack's head. Close enough, that Jack could feel the shockwaves from the axe blade. Close enough that Jack's hair was touching it. Gwyn scrambled in, sword out and ready.

Pitch advanced on Jack, until Jack flattened himself against the wall. He'd expected unpredictable. He'd expected anger. He hadn't expected to lose about a centimetre of hair on the left-hand side of his head.

*'So the axe...works, then?'* Jack said, uncertainly.

*'What did you do?'* Pitch hissed, digging into his robe only to pull out a silver chain – sans locket – and dangle it from his fingers. Pitch saw Jack's staff. His eyes widened, then narrowed into a glare.

*'We can remake it,'* Jack said, hoping he didn't sound as shaky as he thought he did.

*'No, you *can't*. The meteor metal will only be reworked so many times before it becomes *useless*.'*

*'I did what I had to do,'* Jack said, voice firming. *'You could try a little gratitude, maybe. You're not possessed anymore.'*

Pitch snarled, brought up his hand and wrapped it around Jack's throat, squeezing. Gwyn stared between them, but didn't intervene. His sword was still up and ready, just in case.

Jack's fears split in so many different directions he couldn't keep track of them all. But the one he couldn't escape was the horrible sense that Pitch would be able to see right through the deception of the scarf, right into his soul, read all of his fears about Augus. Makara had *promised* it wouldn't happen, but Pitch's energy was a palpable force. In that moment he seemed strong enough to overcome something so simple as a scarf.

*'You destroyed my sword,'* Pitch said, his voice taking on a dangerous, silky smoothness that was only a hair's breadth away from being the Nightmare King's drawl. *'You might as well have destroyed the *locket*.'*

Jack's breath deserted him entirely. His heart locked up. He forgot about the fingers tightening around his throat, forgot everything except that betrayed, furious expression in Pitch's pale eyes. How could destroying the sword be as bad as destroying the *locket*? What if Pitch was right?

*'You're scared,'* Pitch breathed. *'Very.'*

'I'm not scared of you,' Jack managed, blankly.

'You're scared of what you've *done*.'

Jack searched Pitch's eyes for affection, for a sign of the Pitch that had turned around and asked Jack to save him. The Pitch that had lain in bed with him, let him curl up in an armchair by his side, who had found his way deeper into Jack's heart than anyone else ever had. And he couldn't see anything. He was terrified that Pitch didn't remember, that he'd forgotten everything they'd shared together.

Pitch's fingers squeezed, a warm band over his throat. His expression shifted, slightly. His eyes widened a fraction and his pupils dilated. Uncertainty. It lasted no more than a couple of seconds. And then he was glaring again.

He let go of Jack's throat, wrenched the axe from the wall, where it had splintered wood. He made a thin sound of pain at the movement, and Jack realised he'd probably re-opened the arrow wound in his shoulder. Gwyn shifted, having noticed.

'Leave me alone,' Pitch said without looking at Jack again, and then stalked from the room. His bedroom door slammed.

Gwyn sheathed his sword and frowned.

'I should go check on him.' He flashed Jack a brilliant smile. 'Chin up, Jack! At least he's awake!'

And with that, he disappeared, leaving Jack up against the wall, shaking.

*You might as well have destroyed the locket.*

'Oh god,' Jack whispered.

Acid bubbled in his gut. What if it was true? There was no way it couldn't be, with that reaction. For a split second, he'd thought he was about to get one of the most terrifying axe-blades he'd ever seen through the head. Now, coming down from adrenaline and the worst of the terror, guilt crept like tar, clogged up the back of his throat, made him feel sick.

Alongside that, a spark of irritation. He'd done what he *had* to. They needed to destroy that sword. The arrow, the chain, even Jack's staff; all of it had been necessary. And it had worked, hadn't it? The only reason Pitch could stand there, yell at him, was because Jack had done what he had to do.

'I did the right thing,' Jack whispered to himself.

\*

He found the courage to creep to Pitch's door, past midnight. He couldn't stand not being near him, and just wanted to stand inside the room maybe. He didn't want to explain what he'd done. He just wanted to be close.

He waited by the door, raised his fingers to the wood-grain and watched as frost rapidly crept along it. He curled his fingers and knocked quietly.

He stepped back when he heard footsteps.

North opened the door a crack. Then – despite his bulk – managed to slip through and close the door behind him again, without Jack ever seeing the slightest glimpse of Pitch.

'Jack,' North said, looking at him with a sadness that made his eyebrows droop and his mouth thin.

'I just want to see him,' Jack said, already knowing it was hopeless.

'Jack, he is not wanting to see you.'

'Is it because of the sword? Because of...because- Doesn't he see that we needed to? And that-'

'It is for more than one reason, Jack, I am sorry. He is healing, and weak, and we must be respecting his wishes.'

Jack couldn't meet North's eyes. It was too painful, seeing that breadth of empathy. Inside, fear stirred. Fear that he had done so much only to still be alone, abandoned. A small, cynical voice inside of him – the one that had been growing louder since the battle at the gymnasium – said that it was a perfect waste of fear, given that Mora wasn't there to feed upon it.

'Can you just tell me if he's okay?' Jack said finally, staring past North to the closed door, knowing that Pitch – if he was awake – could probably feel those fears that the scarf didn't hide.

His body was attuned with a strange, tingling hope that Pitch would do what he'd always done when he'd sensed the strength of Jack's fears. That he would put everything aside, that he would come out and offer reassurance; even painful, pushy reassurance.

He kept staring at the door.

'We are almost sure he is Pitch. But, Jack, he is not okay,' North said heavily.

'Is he talking to you?' Jack said. He wanted to any information he could, use it to remind himself that Pitch was back. He was embarrassed by himself, by how much he missed him.

He absently built layers of extra ice around his heart.

'Not often. He is sleeping a lot, Jack. He needs it. He has been through an ordeal.'

Jack's eyes flew back to North's, widening. There was something in North's expression that was strangely disapproving.

'Gwyn told me of your plan,' North said grimly.

Jack had no words, no defence. *It worked*, came immediately to mind, but looking into the face of a disappointed North stole every sentence away.

'But this is not only reason Pitch does not want to see you.'

'What...more could there be?' Jack said. North shook his head, he was clearly not going to say.

His focus narrowed down to a single point. Pitch was behind that door, in the room next to Jack's. Pitch, who had loved Jack, at least once, and was the loneliest person Jack had ever met. He'd been tormented by the shadows, he'd lost his daughter, he was recovering from possession, injury, seeing her again.

Jack just wanted to *be there*. That's what people did for each other, right?

But the longer Jack stood there, the longer Pitch stayed behind the closed door, an unknown quantity. Things had changed. There was no way Pitch couldn't read at least some of Jack's fears; he'd proven that earlier. The Pitch who couldn't stand Jack's fear of abandonment, who couldn't

help but respond to his fear of being alone, was gone.

Jack took a step back, then another. He blinked when he saw snow falling inside.

‘Uh, whoops,’ Jack said, as North brushed it off his shoulders. ‘Still getting used to it all being back again, sorry. I’m just gonna- I’m gonna go and get some air.’

‘Jack, no, it’s not safe.’

‘I really wish you people would stop saying that to me,’ Jack said, shaking his head at North. ‘You say it like you know what it means. Safety doesn’t mean anything, North. I’ll be fine. I’ve got my powers back, I can look after myself. I’ve done okay so far, haven’t I? He’s back, recovering. And...I just need to get outside. Okay?’

Jack turned and flew away without waiting for North’s response.

He was tired of people telling him it wasn’t safe.

\*

It was the first time he and Mora had raced on the winds since she had returned. He didn’t feel the same sense of gambolling fun that he used to, but it cleared his mind. It had been too long since he’d simply shot up high into the sky, with Mora for company. It took her almost no time to find her feet again, and only minutes passed before she was dropping and rising amongst the winds, galloping and cantering, occasionally switching to the high-spirited trot she saved for when she was especially pleased.

He was surprised at how easily snow and frost answered him. He hardly had to think about it, and there it was. Snow falling, ice glittering in the sky, frost following his footsteps as he leapt from treetop to treetop before shooting back up into the atmosphere, flying upside down, looking up at the constellations.

He waved his staff over his head and snow burst from it, allowed himself to drop until the snow itself looked like constellations.

*Even better*, he thought.

He turned and started flying through the sky with something that looked like purpose, but he had no idea where he was headed. He just wanted to get *away*. When was the last time he’d had the power to cut loose like this? He couldn’t remember.

Mora kept up, galloping hard to make sure she didn’t fall behind. She wasn’t eclipsing him as often with speed, but perhaps she didn’t want to. The small star on her forehead glowed in the night. It looked like Sandy had lit a small candle inside of her. Whatever he’d done, she looked healthier than she ever had. The sand that formed her was glossy, she had a vibrant blue-violet sheen at certain angles.

He slowed after an hour, hovering over Russia’s taiga, staring down at the poorly formed trees that struggled to grow in the permafrost. He wanted to fly amongst them, decorating branches with icicles, but he didn’t dare. The Each Uisge could melt frozen water, and who knew how he was able to tell where Jack was at any one time. Gwyn had maintained that he had spies everywhere. He stayed high in the sky, hovering.

Mora whickered softly, and he stretched out a hand without thinking. She nuzzled it, and he watched as frost spiralled quickly across her face and down her neck. It feathered out in its fern-like



shapes. After a few seconds she shook all over, dislodging it, and then pushed her nose back into his hand. The frost immediately started again, and he smiled.

‘You’re a strange one, Mora,’ he said.

She huffed into his hand, and he scratched at the velvety sand of her.

Her nose stopped snuffling into his hand and her head swung around, looking at something on the horizon. Jack followed her gaze and saw a dark, winged figure rushing towards them at speed. *Gulvi*, was his first thought, but then he realised that the figure didn’t have creamy pale wings as she did.

He raised his staff, heart pounding. Before any of this had happened, he would have been excited – if wary – to meet another spirit. Now he knew the sorts of things that were out in the world.

He decided not to wait, jumping onto the wind and letting it yank him away. He turned with it, keeping his staff up and out in case he needed to use it. Mora galloped at his side, aware of his fear, agitated, tossing her head.

He looked over his shoulder, and the figure was coming straight for them. He saw starlight glint on metal, and realised they had a weapon. He couldn’t tell what it was from such a distance. He swallowed, put on an extra burst of speed.

A moment later, something whizzed past his face. He watched the projectile fall from the sky, felt an electric buzz of anger crest behind his eyes.

He swung around and clapped both of his hands on his staff. Why were people always messing with him? He was sick of it.

Frost lightning shot up and out in jagged, determined strikes that were so bold and bright, they lit the entire sky. The winged figure paused and dodged, slowing down. Jack kept the frost lightning up, breathing fast, and then called snow to him. The air shifted, the barometric pressure dropped, it wouldn’t take long.

He and Mora travelled upright into quickly forming cloud, and he reached out to her, to touch her side, to remind himself that he had to make sure she got back to North’s Workshop safely. As cloud thickened around him, he rose above it, moving through spiralling peaks and swirls, looking behind him.

The figure, whatever it had been, wasn’t behind him. But Jack looked down at the cloud beneath him with a hammering heart. He kept expecting a formless enemy to clear the cloud cover, to come up just underneath him. He expected arrows or bullets.

‘Faster, Mora!’ he shouted.

He called a wind that was faster than Mora was used to, and she stumbled upon it, before letting it drag her along.

Together they raced back all the way to North’s Workshop. Jack only stopped when he was safely inside the chaotic, noisy place, even though the wards extended beyond the building itself. He kept a close watch outside, through one of the arched windows, and then backed inside quickly when he saw the winged figure drop from beneath the clouds, hovering beyond the Workshop’s wards.

His fear was quickly eclipsed by something else, it started in the clenching of his jaw and finished with both of his hands wrapping tight around his staff. He turned back to the window, frost-

lightning sparking.

But the figure was gone.

\*

The night was creeping slowly towards dawn. North was sleeping. Sandy was out making good dreams for children nearby. Mora rested in Jack's room, hind leg cocked, eyes closed.

Jack was trailing his fingers along the wall, watching the frost come. It stopped when he willed it to stop, but when he allowed it to start again, it spread faster than it used to. It curled and danced along wood-grain and through crevices. It spidered its way out hungrily. It was mesmerising. He looked down at his feet and noticed that he'd frozen more of the ground than usual.

'Huh,' he said.

Jack decided not to tell anyone about the strange, night chase he'd experienced until morning. The wards were strong, North looked tired, and he didn't think it was something worth contacting Gwyn over, especially knowing he'd just be there the next day anyway.

But he was restless. He walked up to the common wall between he and Pitch's room and placed his palms flat against it. He pressed his forehead to it, breathed frost into the air. He had an idea.

He slipped out of his open window and floated towards Pitch's window, clinging to the wall and looking behind him to make sure that there were no other creepy winged-creatures hunting him. Not that it mattered, the wards were comprehensive pieces of magic; projectile weapons couldn't move through them, nor magic, or compulsion.

Jack poked his head above Pitch's window ledge quietly. He peered into the room, but could see hardly anything. Aside from the faintest outline of sheets and blankets, everything was completely dark. He couldn't even see the golden glow of Pitch's eyes, which meant that he was likely sleeping, or resting.

Jack reached up with a single hand, pressed it against the windowpane. He sent strong, defined frost patterns over the glass. Patterns that could only unmistakably be him. He knew it was probably the wrong thing to do, but he just wanted Pitch to know – badly – that he was there and thinking of him.

When he was done, he lowered his hand and rested his chin on the windowsill. He stayed until he couldn't bear not knowing if Pitch was awake or not anymore, and crept back to his own room. He stayed up until dawn, legs hunched up to his chest, one arm around them, and his chin resting on his leg. He watched the sky quietly. Beneath guilt, memories, fear, lurked a prickly, rigid sensation. A knowledge that if any of the Unseelie fae wanted to cross him, they were welcome to *try*.

Dawn was a grey affair, made bleaker by the clouds that Jack had trailed behind him. Snow fell as the sun rose.

Jack got up and walked out of his room, and then stopped when he saw Pitch and North exiting the other room. Pitch's made eye-contact once, an unfathomable expression on his face, and then his gaze drifted away. Jack was familiar with that expression. It was the one Pitch pulled to himself whenever he was going through inner turmoil.

He couldn't say anything. There were so many sentences piling on top of his tongue that no words could escape his mouth.

But when Pitch and North were several steps away, Jack took a hesitant step forward.

‘North?’ he asked.

North looked at Jack over his shoulder, and then touched Pitch on the arm awkwardly before coming back and taking Jack back into his room.

‘He has asked to be moved to a different room, Jack,’ North said, his face twisting in apology. ‘I am thinking it is just temporary. But-’

‘He’s asked to be moved away from me, hasn’t he?’ Jack whispered, thinking back to the frost spirals that he’d made on the window pane and regretting that he’d done it at all. He was suddenly reminded of all of those years coming on too heavy, too needy, with spirits. The satyr – his first meaningful encounter with almost anyone – had found him so clingy that in the end he’d only been able to get Jack to leave off with violence.

Pitch was doing it with silence.

‘Jack, it is only temporary, I am sure,’ North said, but Jack didn’t want to be soothed. He felt a mire of emotions. A cloying guilt, a caustic, acidic anger that built in his stomach and settled in his throat, and fear. Fear that there were some things that one couldn’t heal from, that one couldn’t forgive.

‘*Jack*,’ North said, and Jack flinched when North placed a hand on his shoulder. He hadn’t expected it, so couldn’t brace himself for the touch.

‘No, it’s- I get it,’ Jack said, standing up straighter, shaking his head to clear it. ‘I need to speak to Gwyn anyway. I was chased last night, when I was out with Mora. I think someone needs to let him know that the Workshop is probably being watched.’

North narrowed his eyes, grimaced.

‘You were chased? Are you alright?’

Jack waved a casual hand.

‘Look at me. It was fine. I just think everyone should be warned about it until we know whether it’s just me, or anyone who happens to be protecting Pitch.’

North removed his hand from Jack’s shoulder as he stood, and Jack breathed a silent sigh of relief. Touch was difficult. He knew why, he didn’t let himself think about it. There were too many other things to think about. It could wait.

‘I will also be asking Sandy to keep an eye on things. He has good night vision,’ North said.

*Like Pitch*, Jack thought.

Jack stared beyond his room to where he thought Pitch might be waiting. Pitch had asked to be moved. He didn’t want to be near Jack. The knowledge tore at something already brittle inside of him. His breathing turned shallow, and Mora walked over to him, knowing that something was wrong.

‘Don’t give up, Jack,’ North said, and Jack blinked in shock.

As if he could.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Aimless,' Jack learns the type of nightmares that Pitch has been having, Gwyn isn't done needing Jack's help, and after an encounter with North, Jack escapes to his old shack, and discovers something new about his own powers.

# Aimless

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

‘I never thought I’d say this, but those were good instincts, Jack. Leaving when you did. That definitely sounds like it was one of his. You are right, I think the Workshop is being watched.’

‘You think? What possibly gave you that idea?’

Jack laughed, the sound abrasive.

Gwyn glowered at him, he drew himself upright in his seat where he’d been slouching.

‘Jack, I am still the King of the Seelie fae, and you should accord me respect.’

‘You’re not *my* King,’ Jack said, unable to stop the small thrill that rushed through him at saying it. He’d been wanting to say those words to Gwyn since the very first time they’d met. Digging at Gwyn was satisfying. What with Pitch asking to be moved to a different room, being chased by some creepy figure and wishing he’d retaliated properly instead of *running*... it all added up in his head. Pervasive anxiety gnawed at him. His hands itched to make frost and icicles.

Gwyn leaned forwards and levelled a direct stare. Once, expressions like that would have been Jack’s downfall. But either he’d spent enough time around Gwyn to not see the dra’ocht anymore, or repeated encounters with the fae had changed the way it affected him.

‘I am three thousand years old, give or take a few centuries,’ Gwyn said grimly. ‘I am *young*, by fae standards. Take a moment to think how you must look to me, and how much patience I have with your attitude.’

‘I’m not a child,’ Jack ground out.

‘Then by all means, stop behaving like one.’

Gwyn leaned back and scratched his shoulder. Ever since the Nightmare King had been defeated, Gwyn almost never wore his armour. He wore simpler clothing; natural fabrics, light material.

‘Do you know who the winged figure could be? I know you’ve mentioned the Glashtyn? Is that-’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Ash – the Glashtyn – is pure waterhorse. Augus’ younger brother, remember? I also doubt that Augus would send him out on surveillance. I told you once that Ash’s centre was tomfoolery, he is a light-hearted creature for an Unseelie fae; certainly when one considers that he is Augus’ brother. He is a weak link in an already weak Court. Augus would never send him against you. He values his brother’s welfare too much.’

‘It sounds like we can use that,’ Jack said, dipping his staff to the ground curiously and watching frost creep along the bricks in the room.

‘Yes, of course,’ Gwyn said, in a way that indicated he’d probably put something into effect already. One thing Jack had learned about Gwyn; he was constantly thinking of ways to manipulate and change the game in the Courts. For someone who couldn’t function properly in interpersonal relations, he found Court politics easy.

‘So he’s gone,’ Jack said softly. ‘The Nightmare King is gone. We destroyed a lot of the Nightmare Men. But there’s still a few living shadows left, right? Dullahan has some, the Glashtyn has some. And doesn’t Augus- I mean surely he’s got them somewhere, right? I know he doesn’t really use them, but he must-’

‘It’s best not to assume anything when it comes to Augus and the living shadows. But, yes, you are correct. There are living shadows out there. Pitch is not out of danger. I fear he would be easily colonised again, especially as he cannot make the golden light at this time.’

‘We have the weapons, we know they work, North could make some more. That way if Pitch does learn how to use the golden light again, we have a defence. Even if one of us is possessed, those weapons *work*.’

Gwyn nodded, pensive. Jack sometimes didn’t know why he sat down and talked with Jack so often. It occurred to him, a few days before, that it might actually be because Gwyn thought they were *friends*. Gwyn had seen Jack at his worst, and Jack had seen Gwyn weakened by the walk up the mountain, shocked and dismayed when Jack had pressed his lips against his, angry when something hadn’t gone to plan, uncomfortable around the Glasera. Were they friends?

‘What was it like for you, growing up?’ Jack said, and Gwyn shifted, squinted.

‘Why?’ He sounded defensive.

‘It’s a question that people ask each other, I’m pretty sure? I don’t know, I was just...curious. Don’t want to spoil the enigma, huh? Got an image to maintain?’

Gwyn’s lips quirked up in an actual smile, and then he laughed. His face creased up, and for a second he looked like a young boy, and not a grim, older King.

‘No, no, not that. *Enigma*? No. It was a political childhood. I was born into the Court system and was surrounded with Court politics. As soon as I was of age and trained as a soldier, I left to fight wars.’

‘Because they were better?’ Jack said, raising a brow. How could war be *better*?

‘I like fighting for a cause,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s what I do. Court politics is no other cause than fighting for your own status increase. We have – as un-progressive as it is – a class system. And in that class system, a status increase is a literal power increase. Some fae will fight very hard to ensure they reach their maximum potential.’

‘Huh,’ Jack said, intrigued. ‘But you didn’t? I mean, I assume King or Queen is like the very top of the pyramid right? And you didn’t want that?’

‘There are more things to life than being extraordinarily powerful.’ Gwyn’s face clouded.

‘Yeah, but what? I mean, what would you be doing otherwise? Just...fighting things? Pitting yourself against others?’

Gwyn frowned, he raised a hand in the air in entreaty.

‘Where is all of this coming from? Why do you wish to know?’

‘I’m curious. We spend a lot of time around each other, and I hardly know you. What about Pitch? Does he know? Like, do you talk to him? You’re friends, right?’

Gwyn blinked.

‘We talk about war. And battle strategies. And weapons. And a few times, Pitch told me about his past. I believe once or twice, I admitted my doubts regarding my ability to successfully overthrow the living shadows. That was a doubt we both shared.’

‘And that was it? Really?’

‘What more is there?’ Gwyn said, looking genuinely bewildered. ‘I have camaraderie with my soldiers. I have a knowledge of justice, and what is wrong, and what is right. We have just overthrown the Nightmare King. What more is there?’

Jack swallowed. Was it just that the fae were so different they didn’t place much stock in emotions like love? He doubted it. It was like Gwyn had revealed a significant piece missing from himself, and didn’t even realise it was gone.

‘I suppose that I am looking forward to being able to talk with Pitch again,’ Gwyn admitted, hesitantly. ‘Now, to the matters at hand.’

And with that, they were back to business. Gwyn firmly closed the door on further discussion of personal matters.

‘I want your help defeating Augus and removing him from power.’

‘You have more powerful fae in your Court, though,’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded.

‘Absolutely. But Augus doesn’t know what to expect from you. You’re not fae. You’re unaligned. And with your help, with *your* plan, the Nightmare King has been thwarted for the first time in anyone’s living memory. Augus has a shattered Court, and no one else wants to join it. Augus on his own, but even without a coterie of power around him, he is extraordinarily powerful.’

‘Because he’s a King? Like you? He has all that...status increase?’ Jack said, confused. And Gwyn shook his head.

‘No, he is *powerful*. He doesn’t need to be King to do an immense amount of damage. He overthrew his King – the Raven Prince – and no one expected it. He did it on his own, without anyone’s help, and no one has seen the Raven Prince since. Fae royalty are thought to be *truly* immortal, and yet where is the Raven Prince? Trapped up in magic? Locked away? No one knows.’

Jack didn’t like how Gwyn could talk about Augus like he hadn’t attacked Jack, as though nothing had happened. He supposed – to Gwyn – nothing *had* happened. When Jack couldn’t help but look back over the events, he didn’t understand why the events bothered him so much. Augus had barely hurt him, and aside from a few bites, there was little he’d done that had physically *hurt*. Yet every time someone mentioned his name, Jack felt sick.

‘Uh, well, of course I’m willing to help,’ Jack said.

‘I imagine you want your pound of flesh, too,’ Gwyn said and Jack shuddered.

He thought he’d want that, but he didn’t. At no point could he summon a true anger or outrage at Augus for what had happened. He’d tried. He thought it might make things easier. But every time he skated close to the subject, he felt only fear, disgust, *shame*. He wasn’t angry at *Augus* for what had happened.

‘Jack, are you alright?’ Gwyn said, and Jack nodded absently.

‘What will you do about the fae that chased me?’

‘I’ll post a watch around the circumference of the Workshop. Actually, there is a small band of five Seelie fae who stand watch already. I’ll add some more, increase their range.’

‘You’ve had us under watch?’ Jack said, and Gwyn raised his eyebrows.

‘How eager do you think I am to see the progress we’ve made ruined? Of course I’ve had the Workshop under watch, and Kostroma, and a select number of other places that could come under danger.’

Jack took a moment to absorb that information.

‘Then where were they?’ Jack said, ‘All I saw was someone who chased me.’

‘You were far out of their radius until you got returned, and you said you created heavy cloud cover? I would say that by the time the watch knew anything had happened, it was snowing and you were back within the wards. You travel a fair distance when you’re flying at speed. I’ve seen you at the Wild Hunt. I know how quickly you cover ground. I am not going to tell you to stop doing this, but you have to keep in mind that the further you go, the less likely you are to be under anyone’s protection.’

‘I can protect myself, now,’ Jack said, sending a coat of ice crawling across the table towards Gwyn. The King of the Seelie fae said nothing. Though – for once – he didn’t look like he was about to disagree. He looked out of the arched window and sighed.

‘August’ behaviour perplexes me. Every time I think that he is a clever strategist, he does something foolish.’

Jack’s chest tensed. August Each Uisge again. He had enough on his mind already.

‘He started out as underfae, with his brother Ash,’ Gwyn said, looking through the window to the clouds that were still spilling their snow. ‘The lowest caste. For at least one thousand, maybe almost two thousand years, he didn’t seem particularly ambitious. Like most waterhorses, he seemed to want for nothing more than a small space of land, a lake to inhabit, a regular source of food.’

‘People to eat,’ Jack said. Gwyn shrugged.

‘Well, humans. But one day he started pushing up through the ranks very quickly, becoming the Raven Prince’s confidante. The Raven Prince was much beloved by everyone, and very wise, no one expected that someone like August would- When he removed the Raven Prince from power and took his Court, the previous Seelie King could still handle him. It was when the living shadows became involved that everything became untenable. The Seelie King removed himself from power, and I found myself pitted against a creature who does not fight a war as I would.’

Jack didn’t want to be talking about this. His breath caught in his throat. Gwyn talked about August like *he* was scared of him, and that wasn’t a good sign.

Jack stood up, needing to get out of there. He floated up out of his chair and Gwyn blinked when he noticed Jack ready to leave.

‘Is this making you uncomfortable?’ Gwyn said, standing up and staring hard at Jack.



‘No,’ Jack said, knowing that there was nothing convincing in the word. ‘And I don’t want to hear it that I need to be better at this, or that we don’t have time for me being this way, or that I-’

‘I wasn’t going to say that,’ Gwyn said, indignant.

‘Sure,’ Jack laughed. ‘Sure you weren’t.’

He flew away, found a dark, quiet corner in North’s Workshop. He landed within a dim room, between a stand of Christmas trees that grew inside even with no source of soil or direct sunlight. They were unadorned, and Jack felt unexpectedly like he was cloistered in a forest. The shadows were a strange comfort, and he bowed over amongst the green, wrapping one arm across himself and blankly staring at the floor. He used his staff to stay upright.

Panicked breaths rasped in his chest for a long time, before he felt composed enough to leave.

He would remember the location of that room.

\*

The wind whispered the location of Pitch’s new room to him, and Jack crept around the Workshop at night, skimming the edges of the building.

Pitch’s new room, on the upper levels, had a balcony. Jack touched down upon it and tugged the hood of his sweatshirt down further over his head. It didn’t matter, Pitch was going to see him if he was awake, but he still couldn’t fight the instinct to stay inconspicuous.

He floated towards the wooden door. It had been left ajar. Pitch had always enjoyed cold breezes, even before Jack had come along.

Jack lost his nerve before entering the room. He stood by the door, making sure not to touch anything, not to accidentally announce his presence with the spilling of frost. He listened and heard the sound of the night breezes, and quietly – within the room – the steady rise and fall of Pitch’s breathing. He was sleeping.

Jack couldn’t ever remember Pitch needing to sleep so much.

He stayed for half an hour, then left.

The next night he returned at the same time. He had spent the day carefully avoiding North and idly making patterns of frost in his own room. The yeti grumbled at him about how cold the room had become, but Jack said they were welcome to not come in if they didn’t want to. The elves came in all the time. They were masochistic little creeps, Jack decided, and if they could find a way to get into mischief, they would. Once, he appreciated that. Now, he wanted to freeze them all and punt them away.

It was a relief to touch down upon Pitch’s new balcony and wait by the open door, looking into the dark, listening to the gentle rise and fall of breath. The mosaic tiles beneath his feet depicted baubles and Christmas tree ornaments. There was a stone bench nearby, similar to the one that he and North had sat upon all that time ago, when they had watched Pitch make the golden light and North had said, with all confidence; *That man loves you.*

The balcony itself reminded him of Pitch’s room at Kostroma. It reminded him of watching Pitch sleep through sliding glass doors and then frosting the pane, only to draw a smiley face for Pitch to wake up to. It reminded him of running away after he’d found the locket and Pitch had thrown him out. Even with the painful memories, Jack missed Kostroma. He hadn’t let himself return since

Pitch had been possessed, and he didn't want to go back on his own.

He eventually began to doze. He only realised he was falling asleep when gravity pulled him towards the ground. It was the first time he'd felt anything like tiredness, but as soon as he started to fly away, he felt alert again. He spent the rest of the night introducing Mora to North's reindeer. She seemed insulted that he thought she had anything in common with them.

The next night he returned again.

Something was wrong.

He heard a low, distressed moan, followed by hitched, unsteady breathing. Jack pushed the door open with hesitant fingers, it didn't creak. He carefully glided into the room, letting starlight limn the edges of the furniture so that he could see where he was going. Pitch's bed was pushed against the wall, large and covered in richly woven rugs. Jack could see the patterns even in the darkness. It was very different from the plain grey and black blankets Pitch used in the room next to Jack's.

Pitch made a short, aborted sound in his throat, and then shifted, fractious, in the bed.

Jack touched down by his side, looking at the crease in his brow, watching the rapidly moving eyes behind their eyelids.

*Nightmare*, he realised.

A glint of light caught his eye. A coiled, thin chain and beside it, the locket. Jack delicately touched the likeness of Seraphina's face. He turned to Pitch and reached out with a hand, stopped before touching his skin. He could feel warmth radiating. It was so familiar that Jack yearned to be closer to it. But he knew that wasn't allowed anymore.

He shouldn't even be there.

'No,' Pitch murmured, low. Jack's lips thinned, his hands hovered. He wanted to do something, but he didn't know what.

What if Pitch was dreaming about Seraphina? What if he was dreaming about losing her, or seeing her again, and then Jack taking her away? What could Jack offer? He was the *cause*.

'Jack,' Pitch said, harsh and strained, and then his whole body jerked. Jack jumped backwards, eyes flying open, a sound of surprise dying on his lips before he could utter it.

'Pitch,' Jack whispered, touching the sheets nervously. He couldn't be found here. He couldn't stand it if Pitch asked to be moved again. North had told him not to give up, but he was pretty sure that North didn't mean, 'Stalk him while he sleeps.'

Pitch began to shake, and Jack knelt by the bed, closed his eyes, pressed his forehead against the mattress. It reminded him too much of Kostroma, too much of when Pitch had come and woken him from that awful nightmare. That was when he had realised how hungry he was for comfort, and how good Pitch was at giving it. But Jack didn't know what he was doing now, didn't know what he *could* do.

'Let him go!' Pitch shouted, and Jack startled upwards, convinced Pitch had woken himself up. But Pitch was still sunk deep in sleep, a sheen of sweat breaking across his forehead. 'Let- No, Jack, no, *no*. Please.'

Jack knew from previous experience that Pitch could be vocal during his nightmares. He'd heard

enough when Pitch had trained relentlessly with Gwyn and slept – exhausted – every evening.

‘I’m here,’ Jack said quietly, pushing his forehead harder into the mattress and hoping he wasn’t doing the wrong thing.

‘You can’t *have him*.’ Pitch sounded so frightened. And a stone dropped all the way through Jack’s stomach and landed in his gut. He exhaled hard. Was Pitch dreaming about the gymnasium, about the *shadows*?

He reached up, refused to look at what he was doing, but he couldn’t *help* himself, he had to do something. He twitched as he touched Pitch’s cheek with his fingertips. He wanted more of that familiar warmth, he wanted Pitch to rest well.

Pitch mumbled something, incoherent, and Jack dared to look up. His eyes were still moving, intent, behind his eyelids. His lips weren’t visible, pressed so thinly. Jack dared to stroke his fingers down the curve of Pitch’s cheekbone, and then he repeated the movement when Pitch calmed. He turned his fingers around and traced his knuckles gently over that warm skin.

*Don’t wake up, please don’t wake up. Just settle, Pitch. Come on now.*

‘It’s okay,’ Jack whispered. ‘It’s going to be okay.’

Pitch turned into Jack’s hand, and Jack’s heart twisted hard. It was a visceral pain that spread like fire through his chest. He spread his fingers, offered more pressure. He hoped Pitch was taking something like comfort from the touch. He thought maybe he should leave soon, in case Pitch woke up. He was afraid. He didn’t want the moment to end, he wanted Pitch to relax. Even with the Nightmare King gone, Pitch was haunted. North had been right. Pitch was Pitch again, but he was not okay.

‘There, come on, relax,’ Jack continued, keeping his words as soft as possible. ‘It’s going to be okay.’

*I miss you.*

Pitch’s eyes stopped moving behind his eyelids, and he gave a great, shaky sigh. His face relaxed, and his shoulders sank more deeply into the bed.

Jack closed his eyes and his chest heaved with relief.

*Just get up and leave. That’s all you have to do. It’s not rocket science. Don’t be that guy, Jack.*

He couldn’t move. He told himself just five more minutes. That was all. He would memorise the feeling of Pitch’s skin against his skin. It would have to be enough.

He withdrew his hand.

It happened quickly. One moment he was sliding his fingers down in one last caress. The next moment Pitch jack-knifed up in the bed, shouting Jack’s name in terror. Pitch reached out – nightmare-blind – grabbing, twisting Jack’s wrist to neutralise a threat.

Jack cried out in pain, shifted his body instinctively to make the grip hurt less. He felt bones shift under his skin where Pitch gripped him.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay!’ he said, a litany of comfort that couldn’t be true because Pitch had woken up and Jack was there and Jack wasn’t supposed to be there.

Pitch turned abruptly and stared, shocked. Jack wished he could disappear, that the ground would swallow him up. His wrist hurt, he didn't dare make a sound. Pitch heaved for breath, his pupils blown with terror. And then he blinked, blinked again, seemed surprised that Jack was still there and not an apparition. His eyes flicked to where he was crushing Jack's hand and he made a brief, strained sound. He let go of Jack's wrist immediately.

'I'm sorry,' Jack whispered. 'You could just...forget I was here. Don't ask to be moved again, okay?'

Pitch stared at Jack, still taking deep, fast breaths. Jack expected fury, or contempt, or even being ignored. But Pitch couldn't seem to tear his eyes away, and Jack couldn't either.

Jack started to lower his hand and Pitch reached out, fascinated. Jack's whole body froze as Pitch took Jack's hand within his own and held it, staring at the place their fingers met.

Jack didn't know what to think. Had Pitch forgotten about what Jack had done, already? Had he forgotten about their terrible plan to get Pitch back? Jack's fear escalated, until they hammered hard in his chest, until they wrapped a tight band around his head. That gentle touch was so confusing, but he didn't want it to stop.

'They took you,' Pitch said. 'The darkness took you.'

'No,' Jack said, 'it took *you*. You...don't remember?'

Pitch closed his eyes.

'I remember everything.'

'Us?' Jack dared to ask, his voice far higher than usual.

'*Everything*,' Pitch said, squeezing Jack's hand.

A wild bird flapped hard in Jack's heart, trying to get free. It thudded against his ribs, it buffeted his breath, scraped wetly inside of him.

'I can't be around you,' Pitch said, finally, voice flat. He abruptly let go of Jack's hand.

'Pitch, I-'

'Please leave,' Pitch whispered, averting his eyes.

Jack stood up clumsily, ignoring the twinge of pain in his side as the closing wound on his back stretched and contracted.

*I don't want to go.*

But Jack couldn't say it out loud. His head was a mess. He didn't know what had just happened. If he stayed, he was going to embarrass himself, he was going to get upset, he was going to ask for something that Pitch didn't want to give. His hand still tingled where Pitch had grabbed it, where his fingers had touched Pitch's face.

He flew away quickly, didn't stop until he was back in his own room, against the wall and shaking because he didn't understand. Pitch hadn't seemed angry, but what if Jack just couldn't read him properly? He'd taken his hand again, enfolded it in his own. He remembered *everything*. He hadn't seemed *angry*.

Why was Pitch avoiding him?

Jack knew, as he sagged down the wall and accidentally scraped at the wounds on his back. He couldn't take much more of this.

\*

The next day, North found Jack in the room with all the ice sculptures, and closed the door firmly behind him.

'You and I are going to have conversation, now,' North said and Jack stopped turning one of North's ice sculptures back into a block of ice, and frowned. He hoped Pitch hadn't asked to be moved again. He hoped that North didn't know that Jack had been visiting Pitch in the early hours of the morning.

North pulled up a chair and Jack turned back to the ice sculpture, pretending that everything was okay.

'What happened to you, when you disappeared for those days?' North said. 'Because this is what I am knowing. I am knowing that Gwyn came back to the Workshop, covered in blood that had frozen to his arms and hands. *Your* blood. And then the King of the Seelie fae would not tell me anything, until he had found out where you'd gone. You return days later, injured *badly* and recovering, near to death, and tell us everything is being fine. Gwyn, also, tells us that the weapons are working just fine and not to worry. I am familiar with closing ranks to hide something, Jack.'

Jack hadn't thought about the aftermath of that encounter. He hadn't considered that Gwyn might panic. After all, he'd had no idea where Jack was going, and even if he *had* known, he probably wouldn't have been happy to realise it was the Nain Rouge.

'I have tried to be gently pushing, but you are not talking to anyone. I'm *worried*, Jack.'

'You don't need to worry,' Jack said, automatically.

'I think that is exactly what I am needing to be doing,' North said. 'I would like to see you stop me.'

Jack broke away from the icicle-ice-sculpture in frustration. He flew out of his chair and frowned.

'Can't you just be happy that I've got my powers back? You don't have to panic about that anymore, right? I'm not *dying*. And Pitch is back. Things are *fine*.'

North pursed his lips, folded his arms.

'You should listen to yourself,' North said.

'You should maybe trust that I know what I'm doing,' Jack said harshly. 'Who came up with the plan to get Pitch back? I did. And so there's some things that I'm not telling you. So what? I'm sorry that Gwyn came and panicked all over you after I left, but I knew what I was doing even then. And, actually, what I did *worked*. I-'

'Don't you miss it?' North said, which was such an abrupt shift in tone that Jack blinked.

'What?'

'Don't you miss your old centre?'

‘Why?’ Jack said, laughing. ‘What is there to miss? Snowball fights? Snow days? Not ever getting anything done? Procrastination? You think that was someone that would have found a way to get Pitch back? Ha, seriously, pull the other-’

‘It’s still in you,’ North said, standing. Concern sparked in his eyes. ‘The fun, it is still *in* you. Where did it go? Are you hating it that much?’

Jack swallowed. He didn’t know what North was talking about. How could the fun still be in him? He hadn’t felt it for a long time. He didn’t want to.

He looked sideways to double check that the windows were still open, that he could make a hasty retreat. North followed his line of vision and then backed off and sat down again. A moment later he picked up a tiny hammer, a tiny chisel, and started turning Jack’s sabotage into an ice-sculpture again.

Jack floated back to the floor. He knew what North was doing, and he didn’t want it to work but...he couldn’t just fly out of there while North was quietly tinkering away at an ice sculpture, could he?

He walked over and watched North work, quietly. Minutes lengthened, and Jack saw the shape of a fox tail emerge from the base of the icicle.

‘North?’ Jack said, touching his fingers to the fox tail and bringing out more of its tufted fur with a brush of his hand.

‘Mm?’ North said, pretending preoccupation on his task.

‘Am I still a Guardian?’

North paused, he sighed. He looked over at Jack and moved his mouth in a way that caused his beard and moustache to twitch.

‘You are saying the oath, and so-’

‘Yeah, but, I just... am I? Really? What kid wants a Guardian whose centre is resolve? I mean, seriously.’

‘I am sure many children who want to get their homework done,’ North said, with a wry smile.

‘Oh, great.’ Jack waved his hand over the fox idly, and a significant amount of the icicle simply dissolved into tiny frost particles, the haze drifting away to reveal the fox, six feet tall and sitting proudly. North looked up at the fox in wonder and then smiled.

‘I just...don’t feel it anymore,’ Jack said. ‘I thought when Pitch gave me back my power, I thought maybe then. And I felt a rush of *something*. But it went away again, almost straight away. I can’t remember the last time I felt like something was fun.’

North frowned at Jack.

‘That is not normal,’ North said quietly. ‘That is not the way it is working. Normally, when you are leaving one centre behind, and entering another, it does not disappear. No! It stays *inside* you, it is a *part* of you. So – Jack – where did it go?’

Jack looked down at the tiny tools that North used to create his wondrous inventions. He shook his head.

'I don't know.'

'And if you are not feeling it at all, then you have it buried very far down. Beneath, I am suspecting, a lot of other weights.'

Jack felt a creeping numbness as he looked at the burnt and pock-marked table.

'And, Jack, where will your resolve go now?' North said.

Jack took a deep breath.

'I'm going to go out for a while,' Jack said. 'I'll be back later. I just- I don't like being cooped up like this.'

'It's not safe, Jack,' North said, and Jack rolled his eyes.

'Here we go again,' Jack said, 'I know you mean well, North. But I'm not going to do much better stuck here all the time, either. I'll be back in a few hours, okay?'

North held Jack's gaze for a long time. And then sighed in a way that made Jack realise he was hearing that noise a lot from North. He couldn't remember the last time he *hadn't* heard it.

*Maybe I should start keeping count.*

He took one last look at the fox before he drifted out of the window. He headed up to Sandy's cloud, where Mora was resting, and he waved her awake.

'You wanna come with?' he said.

She jumped up onto the winds with him, and they both sped away.

\*

He tried a different direction than last time, and was far more alert; which was saying something, he was never entirely unaware of his surroundings anymore.

Mora, at least, seemed to be one of the few beings in his world who wasn't interested in serious conversations. She rode the winds as she always did. She nosed him for frost spirals. She didn't push him to be something he wasn't.

He was grateful for Mora.

He didn't really miss his sense of fun, but he did miss freedom. Once, he'd travelled around the world unshackled by worry. When his loneliness was unbearable, he could try and outpace himself by flying through the air. And when it was bearable, he could create snow days, provide enough clean and fluffy snow for children that they hardly knew what to do with themselves.

His frustration caused momentary bursts of frost lightning to emit from his staff. They no longer exhausted him, and he allowed the bright, pale blue flares. They felt *good*.

Sometime later, he and Mora touched down warily by his old shack. It was still cobbled together with old, abandoned cabin walls and ice. It looked even less inviting than it had when he first made it.

The tree he used to sleep in was to his right, and he stared up at it, wistfully. It wasn't safe to sleep in trees anymore.

He grimaced at the shack as he approached. He ignored the dark smear of frozen animal pelt that the Nain Rouge had left behind as a threat and promise all those months ago. She didn't scare him as she used to. He'd survived her attack, and he could hurt her now. He wouldn't be caught by surprise again. Not – at least – for a few centuries, judging by what she'd said.

He looked around the forest, peering through the shadows between the trees, and then snarled a strong dislike at the shack itself.

It was impoverished and poorly made. It was nothing like the homes of the other Guardians, other fae. Gwyn suggested that the only reason Jack hadn't made a 'proper' home was because he didn't know how; no one had taught him. But as Jack coated all the horizontal surfaces of the shack – barring the floor – with icicles, he knew it wasn't true.

The shack showed things as they really were. It exposed his insides, how poorly formed he truly was.

He felt a wave of hatred so powerful that he had to stop and catch his breath.

Jack heard a loud crack in the forest and whirled, vision blurring white for a single, terrified second.

A young buck, antlers still small, startled and sprinted off into the shadows. That was all it had been. A deer that had been shocked to see Jack there.

He fisted his hand in his sweatshirt. Even here, he was haunted by Augus. He couldn't tell any of the others, and having seen Pitch's reaction to his own nightmares, there was no way, *no way* he could begin to conceive a time when it would be okay to tell him.

*Hardly anything happened.*

The abrupt surge of rage that powered through him ended with Jack clasping both of his hands around his staff and letting go of the frost lightning.

It shot through the staff, shot from Jack's hands, caused sharp shards of ice to hurl into the atmosphere around him. He closed his eyes, grit his teeth and pulled deep from the well of power inside himself and – finding it limitless – forgot about everything except endless blue reflections, clear frozen substrates, a violent, brittle light that he would use to ruin his shack, the whole forest, if he had to.

He didn't want to see any sign that he had ever been there, ever slept in that tree. Ice poured out of him, endless and jagged and unrelenting. It shook his body with the force of a lightning strike, it threatened to turn his cells inside out, and he wanted it. He would let himself be-

Jack shouted in fear when a hard object butted into him from behind. Distracted, frost lightning sprayed wildly from his staff as he flailed, fell. He scrambled onto his back and held his staff up threateningly, only to see Mora standing there, a spray of ice frozen to her side and mane, nostrils flaring in panic.

And then Jack saw what he'd done.

The shack was gone, the wooden walls obliterated into splinters. Where it stood, a blast of ice that towered feet into the air twisted and folded in upon itself.

Beyond that, trees had fallen, others stood frozen almost solid, and those even further away were hung with icicles, some over ten feet long, able to resist falling to the ground due to Jack's magic.



He'd turned his old home into a broken white and blue world.

Mora came over and nuzzled him until he was able to hook an arm around her cold neck. Her body temperature was nowhere near its normal warmth. He scratched at her side, and she pushed her head into his ribs, snorting when he groaned. She'd hit the bad side, his ribs ached.

'I'm...' he looked at her, looked at the white scene of carnage around her. 'I'm sorry.'

He pulled the shell of frost off her side, apologising again. He hadn't even remembered she was there. It was frightening. He could feel it waiting within – the frost lightning – there was more, he could have kept going.

'Oh...crap,' Jack whispered, draping his arms over Mora and riding out the low-grade fear she caused.

That evening, he didn't visit Pitch again.

He sat on his bed, knees up to his chest, and stared hard at his staff where he'd left it propped up against the wall. He didn't know what had happened. Had his powers been influenced by the time they'd spent in the Nain Rouge? By the time they'd spent in the *Nightmare King*? What if it was both?

It was a long and sleepless night. The only conclusion he managed to come to, was that he needed to speak to Gwyn.

\*

Gwyn returned the next day and Jack asked immediately if they could teleport to Jack's old shack. Gwyn didn't need to be told the coordinates, which meant that – at some point, without Jack's knowledge – Gwyn had familiarised himself with a lot of different locations.

As soon as they arrived, Jack was doubly horrified. It was worse the next day. Some of the ice had grown in scale. Several of the giant icicles had fallen, splitting the ground and standing tall like stalagmites.

It was a frozen wasteland, bordered by damaged forest. The remaining trees had their foliage seared right off them. The ends of the branches were encased in ice.

'So, uh, I did this?' Jack said, as Gwyn stared, eyes huge. 'I think...I'm more powerful? And...help?'

Gwyn turned to Jack with a face that was almost stricken, and then just as quickly he composed himself and looked as grim and in control as always.

'How is it possible that I'm stronger?' Jack said, firmly keeping his frost under control, not allowing the tiniest spiral to move forth. 'What if the Nain Rouge grew it somehow?'

'It doesn't work that way,' Gwyn said, picking up a handful of frost splinters and clenching his fist around them. After a disproportionate amount of pressure, they finally cracked. Even his ice was stronger.

'How does it work then?' Jack said.

'Neither the Nain Rouge nor the Nightmare King has the ability to grow a power like this. I am thinking it is something else. We hit you with the golden light. It was only brief, but at the time I

did think there might be side effects. Remember what it did to that tree? It exacerbated its essence. We've seen this reflected in other living objects from this planet. It likely doesn't do the same to Pitch, because he's used to it. But we're not.'

'But I didn't even have my powers back, at that point,' Jack said. 'I was dying. It nearly *killed* me.'

Gwyn nodded, and then kicked at a pile of the frost splinters. They tinkled musically, but they did not break.

'There was an initiation of old,' Gwyn said quietly. 'Fae who wanted to expand their power, who couldn't find a way to increase their ranking, would undertake it. It was sometimes fatal. They would reduce and then split the core of their power so that they could reshape it. It's a very rare thing to do, most don't want power badly enough to do it. It was, after all, *often* fatal. Perhaps you started the process involuntarily. You did not want to die, but you were still depleted of almost all of your power, and that golden light could easily have split and reshaped the core of you. When Pitch gave you the rest- I can see this being a logical progression.'

'I'm glad you can, because it makes no sense to me.'

'Then perhaps you should go back and look at that first tree we shot with the golden light,' Gwyn said grimly, 'and keep thinking about it.'

Jack flinched when one of the other giant icicles split from a tree branch and thudded into the ground. Gwyn stared. He cleared his throat.

'You'll have to be careful,' Gwyn said. 'If you're not drained after something like this, who knows what you can do now. You need to learn how to limit yourself.'

'I know how to limit myself,' Jack said, 'I've been doing just fine, *limiting myself*. This wasn't a complete accident, it's not like it just *happened*. I was...'

'Then perhaps you should feel grateful that you decided to let loose here, instead of in North's Workshop.'

Jack shuddered, he leaned tiredly against his staff. It was supposed to be a good thing, to be more powerful. But Gwyn was right, this was *dangerous*. He'd destroyed a significant part of the forest around his old shack without thinking about it. He'd have to learn how to get it under control. He'd have to *train*.

Jack groaned.

'I hate training,' he said, and Gwyn laughed under his breath.

'I know, but you'll do it, won't you?'

'Yeah, I know I have to. I need to understand all of this. You really don't think it was the Nain Rouge or the Nightmare King? You're not just saying that to make me feel better?'

'Do you think I say things to make people feel better?' Gwyn said, and Jack snorted.

'Point taken.'

They stood quietly in the forest. Gwyn yawned and stretched after a few minutes, and Jack watched him surreptitiously. He wondered how stressed Gwyn really was. He never talked about it, but it was obvious that the continued loss of fae, his inability to strike down August as quickly as he

wanted, was wearing at him. He wondered what Seelie and Unseelie Kings did when there wasn't a war going on, and then imagined it probably looked a great deal like doing nothing, since it seemed like the Courts mostly managed themselves when there wasn't immediate conflict.

'He doesn't want to see me,' Jack said, awkwardly. He didn't know if Gwyn would want to talk to this, but he didn't want to open up to anyone else about it either.

Gwyn frowned.

'Still?'

'Uh...yeah.'

Gwyn turned to him and squinted.

'And you're what? Not seeing him?'

'Well, he asked, so yeah,' Jack said, and Gwyn's face twisted in confusion.

'I'm surprised you're accepting that. That doesn't strike me as something you'd just accept.'

'Maybe though, with the whole 'parading his dead daughter in front of him' thing that you brought up, maybe he hates me,' Jack said, and the look Gwyn levelled at Jack after that made him feel like ten kinds of idiot.

'How can you think *that*?' Gwyn said.

'How can I not? He asked to be moved because of *me*.'

Gwyn stared past Jack like he could hardly believe he'd been caught in this conversation.

'Jack, I'm not the smartest when it comes to these sorts of things, but even I know there is more than one reason that Pitch would ask to be moved away from you. Maybe it's because I'm a soldier, and I also understand. Have you considered that he thinks he's protecting you from himself? He is a warrior who has been forced – *forced* – to become something he loathes. Not only once, but for a second time. Step back from the matter and look at it objectively. Or maybe the golden light blasted that out of you as well.'

'Shit, Gwyn, take it *easy*. It makes *sense* that he'd hate me. You've all been keeping me away from him! Talking about how it's for his own good and stuff. What am I supposed to think?'

'You could think that sometimes we probably lay it on a little thick, because you are a stubborn, rebellious creature who hardly listens to a thing that anyone says and we just didn't want you bowling in there, first chance you got, in case Pitch wasn't *ready* yet. I didn't expect you to just...sit there and *accept* what we were saying. I thought it might just make you more cautious.'

Gwyn dragged a hand through his hair, and then shook several hairs off that had caught on his fingers.

'I'm tired of waiting for you to talk to me about what Augus did. *That* is affecting you more than you know. Even with your new centre, you should never have just- *This* is exactly the sort of thing I was talking about. And you should know that-'

Gwyn lunged towards Jack, eyes widening in horror.

Jack had enough time to turn around, to look over his shoulder to see what Gwyn had seen. He had

just enough time to feel himself split with terror.

Augus watched silently from the shadows, a smirk on his face, one hand on a frost covered tree. His hair dripped rapidly, and his eyes glowed green.

Jack's gasp was torn away from him as he dissolved into light. His last image was of Augus standing by the destruction that Jack had wrought.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Confrontation,' Bunnymund and Jack encounter one another, and Jack decides to take Gwyn's advice, and stops 'accepting' Pitch's continued stereo silence. That has...interesting results.

# Confrontation

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your kudos, comments and subscriptions and so on. There is just... incredible fanart and creations coming out of this, and I'm meeting amazing people, and boy Tumblr is getting overwhelming (I'm over there as not-poignant). Heh.

Enjoy! This chapter cracks a lot of things wide open.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack's breathing ratcheted up to an alarming rate before they'd even landed in the round table room. His knees buckled as soon as they touched down, his hand wrapped around his ribs. He couldn't contain his breathing. It galloped away from him, faster and faster.

'I have to go back,' Gwyn said, placing an uncertain hand on Jack's back. 'Right now. I can't-'

'Go!' Jack gasped, knowing how important it was. Besides, within the wards of the Workshop, he was as safe as he was ever going to be.

Gwyn disappeared. Jack bent over himself, pressing his forehead to the floor, trying to catch his breath. Trying and failing. He had a terrible, acidic taste in his mouth. His wounds hurt as though they'd just been inflicted. Even the compulsion in his mind, the one that had bidden him to tell Pitch or the Nightmare King everything that Augus had done to him, it strengthened and created a headache that circled all the way around his head and finished at the base of his neck.

Jack groaned and dropped his staff so he could wrap his arms around himself tightly. He was losing it.

*How much did he hear?*

He'd seen aftermath of Jack's increased powers, he probably knew that Pitch and Jack hadn't reconciled. He would have guessed that Pitch was still fragile, still vulnerable. *Oh god.*

He shifted his head on the flagstone until it was comfortable. He focused on calming himself. He heard a sound nearby, panicked and flew back, grabbing his staff and holding it up and outward. A cry of dismay left his throat.

*Bunnymund.*

Bunnymund just stared. His ears were flat against the back of his head. His whiskers lay against his cheeks. His eyes were huge, his pupils wide. The chair he'd been sitting on was pushed to the side. He had both of his boomerangs out, as though he could fight the unseen demons that were plaguing Jack.

He was the *last* person that Jack wanted to see. He tried to force himself into a standing position, but his knees wouldn't listen to the command. He growled in frustration.

'I didn't know you were here,' Jack managed, swallowing down a new wave of gasps. He

hiccupped. There were dark, murky flashes of images pressing their way into his head. He felt water in his lungs. He knew it wasn't there, he *knew*, but he still felt it. It bubbled through him and he gasped wetly, coughed to try and expel it. Before he knew what was happening, he had both hands pressed flat against the stone and was trying to retch up water that wasn't there.

He shouted when he felt a broad hand gently touch the back of his shoulder.

'Don't!' Jack pushed himself backwards, found the strength to stand up after all. He wiped a hand over the back of his mouth reflexively, but couldn't see any water. He wasn't drowning.

'Mate...' Bunnymund said, eyes narrowing. 'What did he do? What did Pitch do to you?'

Jack blinked, he almost startled completely out of his panic.

'Pitch?' Jack said, incredulous, and he started to laugh. There was an hysterical edge to it that alarmed him. Once he started, he couldn't stop. He stepped back so he could lean against the wall and place a hand over his chest.

'You think Pitch is the problem?' Jack said, as Bunnymund shifted uncomfortably. Jack caught his breath just to start laughing again. 'Have you met *any* of the Unseelie fae? Seriously?'

As he tried to get his laughter under control, Bunnymund put his boomerangs away and his paws clenched into fists. His nostrils flared, his whiskers pushed forward. He looked furious, and Jack hoped it wasn't at him, because he'd had enough of arguing with Bunnymund. He'd had the barest glimpse of what friendship might look like with Bunnymund before it had been yanked away.

'What did *they* do to you? I will have their guts for garters,' Bunnymund snarled, and Jack swallowed the rest of his laughter down. No one could find out. Jack had said too much without realising. Bunnymund – for all that he couldn't understand Jack as a person – wasn't stupid. He'd been involved in wars before. He knew the Unseelie and Seelie fae.

'I'm just- It's fine, calm down,' Jack said, and Bunnymund scoffed

'Yeah, like I'm gonna believe *that*. Pull the other one, why don't you?'

Jack shuddered against the wall, he touched the scarf through his sweatshirt uncertainly. There was so much fear bubbling inside him and Pitch hadn't come running. He hoped that meant the scarf was working.

Gwyn returned in a sudden glow of light.

'He's long gone, I'm afraid. I'm not sure how much he heard. I believe he was likely there with the purpose of terrorising you, making sure that-'

Gwyn realised that Bunnymund was there. They exchanged a long, measuring glance.

'Terrorising him,' Bunnymund said, voice flat.

'I'm afraid we can't tell you about this, Pooka,' Gwyn said. 'There are some things that must remain secret at this point in time.'

'You let him get *hurt*?' Bunnymund had his boomerang back out again, the fur across the back of his neck, his shoulders, his upper arms rose stiffly. He looked like he was about to take on the Seelie King himself.

Jack stepped between them. Not that Gwyn looked like he was remotely interested in engaging with Bunnymund, but *still*.

‘He didn’t *let* me. I’m my own person. So back off, okay? We *can’t* tell you, not anyone, not now.’ *Not ever*, Jack secretly thought. ‘We’re not friends, you and me – so you can just drop this whole protective act and we can go back to the way things were.’

‘You think it’s an *act*?’ Bunnymund said, mouth dropping open, whiskers drooping. ‘I...’

Jack turned to Gwyn, not wanting to see that look on Bunnymund’s face.

‘What now?’ Jack said.

‘Now I go back to the Court – gather information. I’m not sure how he’s keeping tabs on you, but whatever he’s doing is effective, and I’d like to stop it if I may. I will keep you apprised.’

Gwyn disappeared once more, leaving Bunnymund and Jack alone in the round table room.

‘I acted like a bloody galah,’ Bunnymund said. ‘The other day I wanted to apologise to you. Things with me and Pitch, they go back donkeys years, mate, and you *can’t* understand what it’s like to have him back and working with all of you. I thought I was fine with it. I thought I’d *grown* past- But I was wr-’

Jack thought that was like him. To not be able to say it.

‘I was wrong,’ Bunnymund said, and Jack’s eyes shot open. His lips thinned, he glared.

‘You’ve been treating me like some- This isn’t just about how you’ve been with me and Pitch. It’s not like anyone’s forcing you to trust Pitch and become best friends with him. I know a lot of stuff has gone down there that I can’t even begin to understand, okay? My problem is that by association, you don’t trust *me*. And you never have, either.’

‘I don’t *understand* you,’ Bunnymund said, and Jack shook his head. It didn’t make any difference. He didn’t want to be down here, having this conversation. He just wanted to be away, in his room, or outside, in the snow. *Or with Pitch*. He squashed down that thought mercilessly. It was about time he started growing up. He’d spent a long time not having anyone there for him when times were tough, he was dismayed at how hard it was to go back to that.

‘North didn’t understand me, and he still *trusted* me. Bunny, you were the one who thought I’d willingly gone and betrayed you to the Nightmare King, that Easter! And even if the others thought it too, it was *you* who-’

‘Easter had just been ruined, mate. My life was in *danger*! You think I don’t look back on that time and how I reacted and- Christ, is that what you’ve been thinking all this time? That I wasn’t sorry about that?’

Jack dug his fingers into his head. The headache undulated through his mind, winnowing pressure into his thoughts. He didn’t have the energy for this conversation. Questions raced through his mind. How much had August seen? And why was he so obsessed with Jack? How was he keeping tabs on him? How was he supposed to know that North and Gwyn didn’t expect him to properly stay away from Pitch?

Jack struggled to shake off the thoughts. It wasn’t until Bunnymund stepped closer that Jack looked up, wary.

‘Anyone can see that you’re frazzled, Jack,’ Bunnymund said. ‘If Pitch didn’t hurt you-’

‘He *didn’t*,’ Jack ground out. Pitch could be hurtful, but it was different.

‘Who’s after you?’

‘I’m not talking to you about this,’ Jack said, sweeping his staff for emphasis and surprised when shafts of frost lightning burst out of it. ‘I need to calm down. I’ll- Maybe later, okay?’

‘Rightio,’ Bunnymund said, lacking the usual antagonistic push in his voice. He grimaced at Jack and then nodded, finally.

Jack flew out of the round table room. He couldn’t tell if Bunnymund was attempting to extend trust by letting Jack leave, or if he didn’t think Jack could handle anymore. He hoped it was the former.

\*

Jack had discovered that he liked the taste of peppermint. He had taken Gwyn’s advice, regarding eating food even though he didn’t need it to survive. It was strange, and didn’t feel natural. It took several false attempts with different types of food to find something he could tolerate in small doses. It ended up being candy canes, of all things, which he pilfered from the Christmas trees in the Workshop. He couldn’t suck on the sugar and make it melt in his mouth because of his body temperature, so he crunched right into it, and hoped that Toothiana wouldn’t notice any damage to his teeth as a result. Then again, he’d crunched down icicles in the past just for the texture, and that didn’t seem to create any noticeable difference.

Not that he’d seen Toothiana in a while. North had said that the longer she stayed away from the Workshop, the less danger she was in. So he’d recommended – some time before Jack and Gwyn had rescued Pitch – that she stay away. He missed seeing her around, but he was glad that at least one of the Guardians had something approximating a normal life, a child-focused existence. North hadn’t been quite the same since his time rescuing the children at the gymnasium. Sandy was still sleeping off how quickly he’d remade Mora. And Bunnymund- Well, Jack couldn’t tell these things, but he wondered how far someone could shift from their centre before their centre officially changed.

He ate two whole candy canes after the conversation after going to the shack with Gwyn and seeing Augus. He hadn’t tasted the first, and then as he swallowed the last of the second, he realised that the food did help a little. It was strangely grounding, the peppermint taste in his mouth gave him something else to focus on.

After that, he turned his mind to the situation with Pitch.

Jack decided he’d visit Pitch again that evening, to see what happened. He hadn’t seemed angry the night he’d woken up from the nightmare and found Jack in his room. And Pitch wasn’t dreaming about Seraphina, but dreaming of *Jack* being in danger. It made him think that Pitch didn’t hate him. Perhaps he was confused, even furious, but after what Gwyn had said and reflecting further, he realised that he could deal with those emotions. They were understandable.

He’d been putting his own pain first; an old habit, as he was unused to dealing with the hurts of others. He didn’t consider how complex Pitch’s reaction to his own return might be. But Jack remembered Pitch breaking down outside North’s Workshop immediately after saving North with the golden light. Pitch had a fragmented identity even then. He’d been so uncertain, so unsure.



Jack had felt those shadows inside of himself for only a few seconds and it was one of the worst experiences of his life, knowing they were intent on using him forever, if necessary. And Pitch had lived through that. Lived through it *twice*.

He had to hang onto that, because if he didn't, lurking behind everything was a strange, caustic anger that abraded him. He didn't want to be angry at Pitch.

\*

He flew to the library in the late afternoon and pulled down several books at random. He stacked them all by one of North's giant armchairs – this one blue and austere – and picked up the first, let it fall open to whatever page it wanted, surprised to find himself perusing eighteenth century Russian poetry.

After three pages he slammed the book shut.

*That was depressing.*

The next book was a treatise on growing Christmas trees. Jack yawned halfway through a section on compost and closed the book. His centre may have changed, but books on boring subjects were still a complete drag.

He got up and slowly put the books away. The giant double doors opened behind him, he ignored it. Yeti came in and out of the library all the time. For all that they didn't look it, they were really big readers, and Jack suspected that North kept his well-appointed library primarily for their benefit.

'Oh,' Pitch said, and Jack jumped, bumped his head on an overhanging shelf and winced, whirling around. 'I didn't realise you were here. I'll just-'

Jack's heart pounded. He could feel it up in his throat. His mouth was dry. The compulsion in his mind strengthened, Jack felt words building on the tip of his tongue. But just as quickly the compulsion faded again, remained broken and controllable.

Pitch looked worn, exhausted. His robe still showed almost no embroidery. Only two glimpses of delicately wrought silver embroidery, that was all. Jack wondered if Pitch had ever gotten around to cleaning the robe with the gold embroidery, back in Kostroma. He'd had to change it when he'd gotten shot, and Jack missed it more than he could say. The gold suited Pitch better than the silver. He wondered if that robe would also be covered in darkness once more.

'I was just killing time,' Jack said, straightening. 'You could just ignore me, and get what you're looking for.'

Pitch stared at him for a long moment, calculating. Then he strode quickly over to some shelves behind Jack, and picked a heavy, leather-backed tome from the shelf without even checking the titles. He knew exactly what he was looking for. He stopped and looked near Jack, but not *at* him.

'How long are you gonna keep this up? This- You not seeing me?' Jack said, stepping away from the bookshelves.

Pitch said nothing. His face darkened, and he started to stalk past Jack. Annoyance prickled through him and he raised his staff and blocked Pitch's exit by bumping the reinforced wood against his shins, frowning.

'Nope, that's a terrible answer,' Jack said.

Pitch refused to look at the staff that – Jack realised – was making frost patterns on the fabric. He had to keep a better eye on that.

‘You do not know what you’re asking for,’ Pitch said smoothly, unperturbed. But Jack could see that odd, terrible stillness on his face. Pitch sounded calm. Pitch looked calm. It meant the *opposite*.

‘I want to see you,’ Jack said, sounding a great deal more confident than he felt.

‘I do not wish to see you.’

‘But why?’ Jack said. ‘Is it because of how we got you back? What we did to your sword? And Seraphin-’

The blistering gaze that Pitch turned on him scoured Jack out. He felt the hairs on his arms rise, his skin crawled.

*Oh, angry about that then.*

But the expression was mastered, Pitch’s face drifted back to that careful indifference. Jack took a deep breath, momentarily grateful. Under the weight of that anger, he’d felt hardly able to breathe.

‘What *we* did to my sword?’ Pitch said, turning towards Jack and tilting his head at him. ‘Gwyn told me it was your idea.’

‘It was all my idea, pretty much,’ Jack said, because as tempting as it was to pretend that it wasn’t, he couldn’t hide from that truth. He deserved Pitch’s anger in this.

‘It’s is *lovely* to see that you can add wily and cunning to your list of attributes. Now, if you don’t mind...’

Pitch pushed away Jack’s staff with his leg and walked towards the exit. Jack flew forwards and stopped him again, hooking his staff around Pitch’s arm and then jumping backwards when Pitch whirled on him, teeth bared.

‘What?’

‘Seriously, if you’re angry at me, just be *angry* at me!’ Jack exclaimed. ‘Stop freezing me out!’

Pitch laughed darkly, a sound that was so close to the Nightmare King that Jack felt a frisson of fear all the way through his body. And at that, Pitch’s eyebrows rose, a smirk pulled its way across his mouth.

‘Oh, *there*,’ Pitch said. ‘*That’s* why.’

He stalked towards Jack so quickly that Jack didn’t have time to back up, and he stumbled. Pitch caught him by the drawstrings on his hoodie and kept him upright. The expression on his face was cruel; a strange, unearthly glint in the pale gold of his eyes.

‘I’m not the man you want me to be, Jack,’ Pitch breathed. ‘I’m not what you remember. What do you expect, hm? Romantic trysts where we both whisper ‘I missed you’ to each other? Where you pretend that I am not so carved up of darkness, that...Oh, Jack, if you knew what I was *thinking*, right now. If you knew what I wanted to *do* to you.’

Jack’s mouth went dry. He wondered if, somehow, some Nightmare Men could have escaped the

golden beam of light and hidden in Pitch's body. He doubted it. But now...

This close, Jack could smell something that was entirely unexpected. Cinnamon. *Cinnamon cookies*. Something tense in his chest relaxed.

'So you're thinking some dangerous stuff, okay,' Jack said, 'I remember how it was when we first met after the shadows had been taken by the Nain Rouge. That was years later and things still weren't entirely right. I bet you thought some pretty crazy shit then too. And so you want to 'do' stuff to me. You're not actually *doing* it are you? Because, alright, if this is it? It's really unimpressive.'

Pitch released Jack immediately, his mouth twisting into a frown.

'Stay away from me,' Pitch reiterated.

'Because you're so *dangerous*?' Jack said, shaking his head. 'Is that it? Are you trying to *protect* me?'

Pitch exhaled something close to a hiss. And Jack couldn't help the burst of laughter that escaped from his throat. He quelled it at the look on Pitch's face.

'Once you asked me if I missed them,' Pitch said, threateningly soft. 'You asked if I missed the shadows. Do you remember?'

Pitch said it in a way that made Jack's eyes widen, made him realise what Pitch was saying before he'd even said it. Jack stepped backwards, the fear rising again.

'How can you *miss* them?'

'They're *familiar*,' Pitch said coldly. 'I've spent more time in their immediate, intimate company, than I've ever spent in 'my' own head. Whatever that means. And it can hurt less, in their presence. It is not just that I have been possessed twice and am susceptible to it happening again. It is that, at times, I wish to leave this noisy, godforsaken Christmas *hellhole*, and find them again. I would only need one, to start my army. Just one.'

Jack listened to the ragged rasp of his own breathing. He couldn't stop hearing the words 'my army' echoing around his head. *My* army. Pitch was still identifying as the Nightmare King. He'd done that before, too, when the shadows had been taken from him. Pitch smiled once, triumphant.

'So, Jack, what's to stop this from happening again?'

Pitch turned to leave once more, and Jack flew in front of him, a pulse of rage sparking up his spine. He was truly tired of people assuming that he couldn't protect himself, or worse, that he couldn't protect *them*. He pushed his staff into Pitch's chest, coating his wrists and the book with frost, forcing him backwards. It wasn't until Pitch hit the bookshelf, shocked, that Jack felt able to answer.

'What's to stop you from being possessed again? *I am!*' he shouted. '*Me!*'

Pitch stared at him, eyes wide.

Jack shoved his staff for extra measure, and anger spread through him. It felt like frost lightning, small strikes of it lancing down his arms and legs. He took several deep breaths to control himself, and the frost spirals stopped spreading on Pitch's robe and skin.

‘I’ve done it once,’ Jack said, ‘and I can do it again. Those shadows can’t fight back against the beams of golden light, and you can’t kill Gwyn and stop him from *making* it. If you go and leave this stupid place, I will find you. And if you do it *again*, I will find you *again*.’

Pitch pushed Jack’s staff away with one hand, hissing as frost spread against his skin. He brushed ice crystals off his robe and frowned at Jack for long seconds, before shaking his head.

‘I’m not safe, Jack. You don’t know what you’re asking for.’

There was something of the reasonable, compassionate Pitch that Jack had come to know before the encounter in the gymnasium, in that voice. A weariness, a despair. It simultaneously gave Jack hope and made him furious. All that pain that he’d gone through – feeling abandoned again, feeling like his world was ending – because Pitch was trying to *protect* him?

‘I’m not safe enough for you,’ Pitch said, and Jack felt something small and lost in his heart poke out through the shell of ice he’d formed there.

‘I think you are,’ Jack said. ‘Safe enough.’

He cleared his throat and looked down at the ground.

‘I still feel safe around you.’

‘Do you?’ Pitch said, sceptical.

‘You don’t want me to stay away,’ Jack added, hoping he was right, terrified that Pitch would reject him.

‘Well, in that, you are correct. There is certainly a part of me that wants you to stick around, Jack. But that part of me wants to hurt you. A great deal.’

Jack looked up, surprised, and Pitch shrugged.

It really is in your best interests, if you stay away.’

With that, Pitch walked out of the room, closing the double doors behind him.

\*

Jack went to visit North that night, wanting something to do before he visited Pitch in his room. North was with the reindeer, reading Dostoyevsky. It was settling all but the largest stag, who paced across the ice and blew hefty amounts of mist out of his nose with every breath. When North saw Jack, he was clearly excited, but he kept himself calm so that he didn’t rouse the rest of the reindeer.

He patted the musky, felted blankets that he lay on, and Jack knelt on the corner. He didn’t know how to ask what he wanted to ask. Since his conversation with Pitch, he couldn’t help but wonder if Augus had compelled Jack to tell Pitch what had happened to him, so that Pitch could go on hurting him. So that it would awaken a dark, sadistic urge in Pitch’s mind. Maybe it was designed not just to trigger pain, but to trigger something else, something truly dangerous.

Jack didn’t want to think that, and when he examined the fact that Pitch hadn’t actually hurt him – barring the first day when he’d discovered his sword had been destroyed – his fear fell away. He felt like he was riding and falling on a huge wave. He wished he would even out. He bet Pitch felt the same way. It wasn’t exactly that he’d ever felt ‘even’ before, but this was ridiculous.

‘So you know he’s not okay,’ Jack said, lowering his voice so that the reindeer wouldn’t get upset. ‘You told me yourself. You said he’s Pitch, but that he’s not okay.’

‘I did,’ North said, sliding an embroidered bookmark into his book and closing it. He rested his hands on his folded legs.

‘When I first met him, North, it was like that sometimes. I think he wanted to hurt me at times. I think maybe he wants that again.’

*Maybe*, Jack scoffed at his own terminology. Pitch did, but it was best not to scare North.

‘I am seeing it in his eyes, sometimes,’ North said quietly. ‘I am not sure how worried we should be. He is seeming to have a great deal of control over himself and those urges. But he would only need to slip once, to become someone I could not keep in the Workshop any longer.’

Jack nodded thoughtfully, surprised North was talking to him about this. Once, North would have wanted to gut Pitch if he even thought of hurting Jack. But Jack wondered how flexible North was in situations like this; how different things were with a recovered ex-Nightmare King. He’d opened his home, he’d taken Pitch back in. Jack didn’t know how much they were talking. He suspected North talked *at* Pitch an awful lot, but whatever they’d exchanged had made North accept that Pitch wasn’t choosing to be like this.

‘Oh, yeah, by the way,’ Jack said, frowning, ‘*thanks* for leading me to think that he hated me. That was like...great work.’

North’s eyes widened, he shifted as though he wanted to reach out, then stopped himself.

‘Jack, I am sorry,’ North said. ‘Why would you think that?’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ Jack said, then looked over his shoulder apologetically as a couple of the reindeer stamped their feet in response to him raising his voice. ‘In my experience, the reason people don’t want to see Jack Frost anymore is because they’ve had enough. So what was I supposed to think?’

North sighed, rubbed a hand over his face.

‘I have been wanting to talk to you about this too, but you are not letting me close to you, Jack. You are not letting me *in*. I am believing the only reason you’re doing this, is because you know that I know that something happened to you. And yes, I want to talk about that. But there are other things we should have been talking about too. You have been avoiding all of us. I am finding, actually, that I miss you, even though you live right here.’

North’s sentimentality was an arrow shaft to Jack’s heart. His shoulders bowed.

‘This is what I am knowing,’ North said, in a tone so gentle and even that Jack knew he was not just trying to reassure the reindeer anymore. ‘Something happened to you after Pitch was taken. There is of course the fact that Pitch was taken, and you have not dealt with this, and even though he is back, you will still *need* to. But then something happened to you, and it was a terrible, terrible thing. A thing I cannot know about. A thing no one can know about. It is something that is making you dislike touch, and I am also knowing of the Each Uisge, and what he is capable of. I will not guess, because Gwyn ap Nudd asked me not to, but-’

Jack knew that North wasn’t stupid, he *knew* that, but he hadn’t realised that North had put so much together.

‘Can you not tell anyone else this stuff? Please?’

‘Gwyn asked me something similar,’ North said. ‘I will wait a few weeks, but it is hard for me to watch you like this.’

‘I didn’t come down here to talk to you about this. I came down here to talk to you about Pitch. He’s not stable, but- He keeps talking about how he wants to hurt me, or he’s worried he will. But all I see is the fact that he hasn’t done anything.’

*Yet*, a traitorous part of Jack’s mind whispered.

‘This is also what I am seeing,’ North said, ‘but Pitch knows himself better than we do.’

‘He also knows guilt and stuff better than we do, too. He’s actually kind of a pessimist.’

North chuckled. Jack picked some reindeer fur out of the blanket and let it fall to the side.

‘I think he’s angry we brought him back. He told me he misses the shadows sometimes. That it hurts less when they’re possessing him.’

‘Then he has told you more than he has told anyone else. Gwyn and I are mostly guessing, based on the few things that he has let slip when he has felt like talking with us. It is a good sign, Jack, that he is sharing these things with you. And I think Pitch is being honest with you, and that is also good thing.’

‘He’s being honest because he’s trying to drive me away,’ Jack said, mutinously.

‘Pitch must remember how stubborn you can be. Perhaps he hopes that you will not fall for this. That you will wait and see how things go. He must do what he thinks is right, and he wants to protect you. Maybe he is being honest to see if it will drive you away. Maybe he hopes you will stay. How could he not be missing your company?’

But Jack wasn’t the same person he used to be. He didn’t know how recognisable he seemed to Pitch. Or – for that matter – to anyone. Pitch might still miss who he was, even while Jack was right there.

‘You agree with me though? That the fact that he’s not actively seeking out shadows again, or doing any of these things he’s worrying about- Do you think that’s a good sign?’

‘Yes,’ North said simply. ‘I would not be wanting him here if I thought otherwise. I do not lightly invite people to live in my Workshop, Jack! If I was truly worried, I would have sent him onto the Seelie Court with Gwyn.’

‘He’s eating cinnamon cookies again,’ Jack said, smiling to himself.

North chuckled.

‘Oh yes, Carlson the yeti told me he put in a special request. I think the yeti are quite happy to be making them again, since they enjoy all the reject cookies. Though you must be aware, they make a *lot* of reject cookies, those yeti. They have to bake a lot!’

North’s burst of laughter stirred up all the reindeer, and he was up and onto his feet, hands out and murmuring soothing things to them before Jack could react.

Jack flew up and nodded a goodbye before leaving. It was the most relaxed conversation he could

remember having with North, since Pitch had been taken.

\*

Just before sunrise, he took Mora with him to Pitch's room. She immediately walked to a dark corner and shivered, eyes widening as she became attuned to Pitch's fear. He must have been having nightmares even though he hadn't started showing any outward signs of distress.

Jack sat on the edge of Pitch's bed. Pitch's face was drawn and fragile in sleep, he looked tormented. Jack hated the shadows with a fervency, that they could do this. That Pitch could miss them, and they could still do *this* to him. They left him with memories of acts he couldn't completely disavow. They had ruined him.

Jack smoothed fingers over Pitch's forehead, noticing the thin sheen of sweat. He wondered if Pitch still needed to sleep every night, still hadn't found his new equilibrium.

Jack, by contrast, didn't need to sleep at all since he'd gotten his powers back. He'd let himself nap a few times to escape the tension and stress inside of himself. But it had been like the old days, when he consciously chose sleep; not like it had become towards the end – when sleep overtook him.

When Pitch's breathing hitched, Jack let his fingertips drift to Pitch's hair, swept back naturally, even in sleep. Several tufts had started to flop over Pitch's head, but smoothed back into place, they stayed there. It felt like thin, filaments of wire. He wondered if he and Sandy had the same strange properties that allowed their hair to stay put, tufted and stiff.

Pitch blinked awake with a silent, terrified start. His pupils were blown, and Jack jerked his hand back, in case Pitch reacted with violence like he had the first time. But Pitch only trembled.

When his eyes cleared and he realised Jack was sitting by him, he rolled his eyes. With the motion, he caught sight of Mora and peered past him.

'I thought I'd seen glimpses of her, but I couldn't be sure,' Pitch said. 'And it is really her, even with that gauche burst of sand on her forehead.'

'I like it,' Jack said, as Mora stepped forwards shyly.

Pitch reached a hand past Jack and Mora pressed her muzzle into Pitch's palm, blowing hot sandy air all over his fingers. Pitch's fingers curled around her nose once, and then he withdrew. Mora stepped back and stamped a small tattoo with her hooves into the ground, a brief agitation, before settling again.

'Do you remember much from being the Nightmare King this time?' Jack asked, and Pitch glared at him, then moved across the bed until he was as far away from Jack as possible, pressed up against the wall.

'Because he said that sometimes he would bring you up to awareness in order to hurt you.'

'Did I say that?' Pitch said, voice dark. Jack shivered to hear that still Pitch wasn't differentiating himself from the Nightmare King. 'When did I say that?'

'Oh, I...' Jack hadn't intended on bringing it up. 'I had a nightmare, just the one. *He* brought it up then.'

'You only had one...' Pitch stared down at his hands. 'I don't remember as much of what I did, of

what...*he* did, this time, as I did last time. I was pushed too deep into the darkness. I had assumed that you'd been having-

'No, well- No. At first there was nothing, because I was in the Seelie Court for a while. And then I had three days with nothing, because I was climbing the mountain to visit the Glasera, and Gwyn and I both realised that in carrying your sword up that stupid mountain – we didn't know at the time – but we were keeping the Nightmare King away. And then you know, they needed the sword and so, that night-

'The Glasera,' Pitch said, straightening. 'You climbed the *mountain*?'

'I had help. But I was saying – that night – I had a nightmare. Gwyn and I both did. It was the only one I ever ended up having. And once we realised that the sword metal kept the Nightmare King away, we used it to protect the other Guardians as well. But that night, the Nightmare King threatened to possess me with the shadows, and-

'He *what*?'

Jack scowled, even though a small leap of excitement moved through him. That was the most Pitch had been able to clearly differentiate between himself and the Nightmare King since they'd started talking again.

'Will you let me finish? Seriously,' Jack said. 'He told me how it would be, if I was possessed. It just made me realise everything he was saying that he'd do to me, was what he was doing to you. It was quite motivational, now that I think about it. I was working hard to get you back, but I worked harder, after that.'

'Get out,' Pitch said suddenly, pushing the blankets back and standing, pointing to the door. 'Get *out*.'

'What?' Jack said, backing off the bed, uncertain.

'You tell me that these things happened to you and you're *still here*? Will you get out and work on growing something of a brain in that empty, hollow shell you call your head?'

'Pitch, I didn't mean-'

'*Get out!*' Pitch shouted, his voice brittle and hard. Mora galloped out of the room before Jack did. He took one last look at Pitch before going to his own room.

Once there, he banged his forehead against the wall. He was an idiot. He'd not been tactful. He should have remembered that these subjects were sensitive. He'd grown so used to them that he'd blundered badly.

*There's always tomorrow*, Jack told himself.

He realised, as he lay down on his pillow and stared up at the ceiling, that he had finally found something to turn his resolve to.

\*

Jack lurked around the library, suspecting that Pitch enjoyed the fact that it was quiet and had a range of books on different subjects. He never stayed long, since he started to suspect that Pitch was avoiding him by sensing his fears and then staying away. So he would drop in, look around, leave again.



He finally caught Pitch sitting in an armchair, writing in a notebook. It was such a familiar site that Jack momentarily forgot what he was doing and watched. He wanted it to be like it was before the gymnasium. He'd changed so much. Pitch had changed so much. Seeing the notebook made him want to curl up in the armchair in Pitch's room, remember body heat along one side of himself. He wanted to sink into the memory and disappear.

'Now is probably the time to tell you that I've never wanted a stalker,' Pitch said, turning the page and continuing with his writing, without looking up.

'So this is it, huh? You're just gonna sulk your way through this?' Jack said, annoyed. He closed the doors of the library behind him and poked frost swirls at one of the unoccupied chairs. 'I mean I get it, I bet you do sulking really well. But I have to warn you, I've spent mostly three hundred years around children who were *really* good at it. You can't sulk me away.'

'No?' Pitch said, standing up and putting down his notebook with calm precision. The look he directed at Jack was strangely glittery. It skated close to cruelty. Jack took a breath.

*Here we go again.*

'So what can I do to drive you away, I wonder?' Pitch said, walking towards Jack with a calm that was far more sinister than it should have been. It didn't help that Pitch brought his hands together and wrung them with a curious hungriness. Jack's hands twitched on his staff. He wanted to bring it across his body, defend himself.

But he also wanted to show Pitch that he was being unnecessarily afraid of his own demons. He wanted to extend trust.

'Well you can't possess me with the shadows, you don't have any of those left,' Jack said, shakily, as Pitch stopped a foot away from him, forcing him to look up.

'Do you know what I think, Jack Frost?' Pitch said and Jack swallowed.

*Back to full names. That's not a good sign.*

'I think that you bent yourself over backwards to try and get me back. I think you actually realised – heaven forfend – that you *love* me.'

Jack made a sound before he could stop himself. He had wanted to tell Pitch, he wanted Pitch to know, he hadn't wanted him to use it against him like *that*.

'What a terrible mistake you've made. I think that you are showing the pathetic gestures of the newly-in-love. They are grandiose, insistent, *repellent*. You may have saved me from the shadows, but if you think love will *save* me from this, you are operating – as ever – under a delusion. Do you know what I see when I look at you?'

Jack's lips twisted into a frown. His eyes narrowed.

'I think you see how scared *you* are, actually,' he said, 'when you look at me.'

Pitch's eyes widened.

'So that's out on the table now, is it?' Jack continued, flippant. 'Already? That I love you? I mean it's obvious now, isn't it? You asked me to save you, and guess what I did?'

Pitch folded his arms.

‘You think you’re not worth saving,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘What am I supposed to do? Indulge that? I’m not the person I used to be, and even if I was, I *still* wouldn’t let you get away with that. You *asked* me to save you.’ Jack’s voice shook. He refused to look at Pitch again. Something terrible shifted in his heart and he had to concentrate to make sure it stayed stable.

‘I didn’t know what I was asking for,’ Pitch said, and Jack laughed before he could stop himself. A flash of anger moved through him again.

‘Maybe you didn’t. But I would’ve done it anyway. You think what I did was the pathetic gesture of the newly-in-love? I...’

Jack couldn’t finish, he wasn’t intimidated, he was *angry*. There was something terribly flat about the expression on Pitch’s face, as though he’d *given up*.

‘What was *your* pathetic gesture of the newly-in-love, huh?’ Jack said, voice hoarse. ‘Going and getting yourself possessed by the shadows to save me? Doing that to yourself again? Oh god, you’re such a *monster*, how could I not see what a *monster* you are, with that grandiose, insistent ge-’

Pitch leapt forwards and grabbed Jack around the shoulders, slamming him against the books so hard that Jack’s wounds – so close to healing over – screeched in pain. Jack gasped as Pitch drew him forward and slammed him back into the books again, his face contorted with anguish and sinister intent. Pitch’s fingers dug so deep into Jack’s sweatshirt that he thought the material might tear.

‘You’d mock the monster?’ Pitch said, holding Jack up off the ground and digging his fingers even harder, so that Jack had to work to make sure he didn’t cry out. ‘I dream, sometimes, of carving you open and seeing how much red is in there amongst all that frost. Seeing if your organs are as cold as I imagine they are. I dream of-’

‘They’re all *nightmares*,’ Jack said, unable to stop grunting when the fingernails dug in deeper. ‘Even if you feel good in the dream, you still react like they’re *nightmares*.’

‘Is this what you want, Jack? A monster? Never knowing which side of me you’re seeing? Hm?’

The flare of frost lightning that blew up from Jack’s staff was huge and intimidating. Pitch let go straight away, and Jack decided he wouldn’t tell Pitch how *easy* it was to make it these days. It looked very showy and threatening, but Jack hardly had to think for it to come up.

‘Yes, you *idiot*,’ Jack said. ‘I do want it. You don’t get it, do you? You don’t know what I *did*, to get you back. You don’t know what I...what I *went through*. And I would do it again!’

*Even Augus*, Jack realised, his whole body shaking.

Pitch stared, his eyes widening in horror. But Jack wasn’t finished yet.

‘If you can’t...if you can’t stand me, because of *me*, then fine. I’ll learn how to deal with that. But if this is just guilt, and all that other *crap*, then you can feel that just as well if I’m by your side, can’t you?’

Pitch stepped back, his shoulders rose and he shuddered out a huge sigh.

‘You’re making a mistake,’ Pitch said.

It sounded almost like Pitch had accepted his argument, but Jack saw *resignation*. It made him

want to shout, yell, blast frost into the air until Pitch accepted his position. But Pitch could not be rushed, and Jack knew that everything was different now; for the both of them.

‘It’s my mistake to make,’ Jack said. ‘So let me.’

Pitch opened his mouth, and Jack held up a hand.

‘If it helps, you can just pretend I’ve heard the ‘You’ll be sorry,’ and the ‘You’ll regret it’ and all the other things you want to add. I don’t care.’

Pitch lowered his eyes to the floor and shook his head. When he looked back up, there was a stony expression on his face. Jack met it with his own. His back was hurting again, he needed to change the bandages. His shoulders were killing him. He had no idea how hard Pitch had pressed, but he *hurt*.

Jack was *annoyed*. He’d expected a lot of things, but he hadn’t expected resignation. He hadn’t thought Pitch would give up.

‘I do,’ Jack said softly. ‘I do love you.’

Pitch inhaled sharply.

‘I’m sorry that it hurts you, for me to say it. I don’t want to do that. But I also don’t want to wait until, ha, until you’re possessed by the shadows again for me to say it. I’d rather just get it out of the way now, actually. So much for those grandiose gestures, huh? I wish I’d realised earlier.’

Jack felt the fight go out of him. He was more exhausted then he could remember being for a long time.

‘Jack...’ Pitch said, and Jack’s heart twisted. He sounded so much like *himself*, that Jack couldn’t stand it. Because it wouldn’t last. Pitch was too all over the place, too inconsistent. He ran a hand through his hair and paused at the pain that screeched through his shoulder. He sighed and lowered his arm. What was it with Pitch hurting his shoulders anyway? This wasn’t the first time.

‘I’ll see you tonight,’ Jack said, and Pitch made a noise.

‘They’re just nightmares, Jack.’

‘I’ll see you tonight.’

He didn’t think he’d be the first to want to leave the room, but it turned out he was.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'A Darkness Remains,' Pitch and Jack find that things between them are still very tense. Meetings are held. And Jack keeps visiting Pitch in the late evenings, to make sure he's there for the worst of his nightmares.

# A Darkness Remains

## Chapter Notes

Thank you SO MUCH for all of your comments, kudos, bookmarks and subscriptions. I get some of the most wonderful comments here, and you have no idea how much fun it is, to be able to interact with you folks like this. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He flew straight back to his room and lay on his bed, feeling the dark space of sleep beckoning him. The heaviness he'd felt and tried to crush under a wall of internal ice was threatening his defences. He had said 'I do love you,' but it hadn't been a fond declaration. Pitch had stared at him like he wasn't in his right mind, and Jack was almost certain that alongside his loss and sincerity, there had been an inflection of 'So there' in his tone when he'd finally said it. So all in all, it hadn't gone how he imagined it would.

It was a relief to give himself over to sleep, instead of having it forcibly claim him. He opened his mind to it, and darkness slunk away with his thoughts.

He woke up to a crisp, cool morning. He couldn't recall any nightmares, despite Mora having stayed in the room with him at least some of the time. He couldn't help but wonder if he'd had them, but couldn't remember. Snow had fallen lightly in his room while he'd been asleep. Snow didn't do that while he slept often, unless he was feeling particularly sad or lonely.

He brushed the snow off his bed and saw small parchment notes resting on his bedside cabinet.

They were from Gwyn. There were three – one for each day that Jack had apparently slept. He had always expected that Gwyn's writing would be a crude, rushed sprawl. A chicken-scratching of hard-to-decipher letters. What he hadn't expected was the calligraphic quality of Gwyn's penmanship, even on – it seemed – hastily written notes. Jack had seen wedding invitations in people's letterboxes that hadn't been this pretty.

The first message:

*It is good that you are sleeping. The timing is inconvenient. I will return tomorrow.*

The second message:

*Upon learning that you have not told Pitch about many of the events post his possession, I have taken the time to sketch these out for him; all except a certain few.*

The final message, in a deep, forest green ink:

*You are still asleep...*

Jack frowned at that one. He was getting better at reading Gwyn, and he was almost certain that the subtext of those four words was that Gwyn had only barely managed to restrain himself from forcibly shaking Jack awake.

He hopped out of bed. Mora wasn't there. She was likely with Sandy, or exploring North's

Workshop. She enjoyed spooking the yeti, especially now that she knew they really *didn't* like it. She was a professional lurker. She waited behind corners and doorways, then stormed out, huffing violently, eyes blazing. Some of the yeti had taken to sending elves around corners first, to check that she wasn't there.

He checked the bandages under his scarf, and realised that the wounds had knitted over completely as he'd slept even though Pitch had re-opened some of them when he'd slammed Jack back against the bookcase. He removed the gauze and bandages, making sure not to remove Makara's scarf, then ran his hand over the raised, bumpy scars. They were not smooth or pale, but a deep, ugly red and wider than they'd been when initially made. Makara was right, they had infected, and the poison had taken its toll. Jack didn't even want to see the additional bite scar on his back where August had actually taken a chunk of flesh. He felt the skin there stretch and pull with many of his movements, and he hoped he stopped noticing soon. Every time he felt it, his mind carefully crept away from any memories of what had caused it; but it was a constant, unpleasant game with himself.

When he took his hand away from the scars, his fingers were shaking. He fisted them and closed his eyes. Sometimes it was easy to push certain thoughts and images out of his mind. And other times, not so much. He heard the ghost of August's laughter in his thoughts and nervously shifted the scarf around his torso. He wondered what Gwyn had discovered regarding August's motives in standing there, smirking, by Jack's ruined shack.

He was halfway through floating down the stairs when he caught sight of Pitch and Mora, standing in a quieter spot. He was glad to see Mora with Pitch, she had always enjoyed his company. Jack remembered, upon seeing Mora, that he had promised Pitch – in the library – he would see him that night, to be there during those nightmares.

If Gwyn's notes were anything to go by, Jack had missed at least a couple of those nights.

His heart sank. He had been so tired, but he hadn't meant to go back on his word. He hated the idea of Pitch going through all of those nightmares on his own. He just wanted to be there for him, how hard was it to stay awake for just a few hours each evening? Frost lightning split from his staff, and he tightened his fist around it.

The staff had always intuited and translated his emotions for him, but he wondered how much the coating of metal from Pitch's sword exacerbated it. After all, Pitch's sword had been a direct conduit of Pitch's good feelings, they were required to seed the golden light. Maybe it conducted more than just good feeling and the golden light. Maybe it conducted everything on the emotional spectrum. Either way, Jack now felt he grasped a lightning rod, and that he was the storm.

Jack wondered how Gwyn stayed in touch with people when they weren't around. He was a luddite, having no understanding of contemporary technology. *Or any kind of recent technology*, Jack thought. Gwyn had used magic, or a spell, to stay in touch with his soldiers when they'd worked to defeat the Nightmare King. Otherwise, Jack had to wait around for Gwyn to visit the Workshop, and had no idea when that would happen. Blowing the horn to summon him was meant to only be for emergencies or significant discoveries, not messages like: *I'm awake now, if that helps*.

Jack flew into one of the many rooms that contained Christmas trees and took two more candy canes off the thickly decorated branches. He re-sorted the candy canes each time to make it look like they were still evenly distributed. For some reason, they were never replaced that often. Unlike the never-ending flow of Christmas puddings, fruitcakes and an abundant supply of cookies.

He started snapping off small pieces of the hard sugar as he flew back up to Mora and Pitch, wondering what kind of mood Pitch would be in. He landed beside them both, looking over curiously. Pitch gave Jack a carefully blank look. His eyes drifted down to the candy cane, and then he looked back out over the noisy Workshop, remaining still for several minutes, until he reached up and swatted away a clockwork airplane. The airplane shorted and plummeted to the ground, and Jack resisted smirking when he heard the distant cry of an enraged yeti.

Jack felt a gulf of distance between them. He didn't know how to bridge it, but he did know he couldn't do it alone. If Pitch wasn't interested, the gulf would remain. Jack sighed and leaned on the banister, staring at the hardworking yeti.

'I hate it here,' Jack said. 'I didn't used to. But it turns out that being trapped here because it's still not safe out there makes it a lot less fun.'

Pitch didn't reply. He stared into the distance, looked like he wasn't even present in the room.

'Gwyn informed me that he was the one who came up with the idea for the battle-axe,' Pitch said some minutes later.

'Yeah. I didn't know what to choose. I didn't want an axe, I mean, I was thinking maybe a smallsword or something. But I don't know anything about weapons. Gwyn explained the difference between thrusting and cutting weapons, and he said that the drills you used with your sword could be adapted more easily for a battle-axe?'

'They can,' Pitch said grudgingly. 'That is, if I wanted to turn something graceful into a graceless exercise.'

Jack closed his eyes. He thought the axe was terrible and beautiful. It reminded him more of the Nightmare King than it did Pitch. There was nothing to be done for it now. If Pitch was to be believed, the metal couldn't be worked again and still be effective against the shadows. If Pitch refused to use it, the majority of the metal from Pitch's sword would go to waste.

'Is the axe really so bad?' Jack said, and Pitch smiled stiffly.

'Yes.'

'You said it was like the locket,' Jack whispered. 'I knew it was important. I didn't know it was like the locket.'

'If you had known, would you still have done it?' Pitch said, and Jack turned and looked at him. He lifted his hands off the banister – where he'd been seeding frost spirals – and shoved them into the pockets of his sweatshirt. He didn't know how to answer.

'What a different spirit you've become,' Pitch said, voice flat.

*Too different?* Jack wondered. He looked down at his bare feet, and then reached a hand out to Mora when she wandered from Pitch's side to his own.

'The sword is gone, but you're here,' Jack said, looking at Mora instead of at Pitch.

'Mm,' Pitch said. 'I can't help but wonder where you've gone.'

Jack looked at him in surprise. Pitch returned his gaze steadily, something disapproving on his face.

'I didn't go anywhere,' Jack said, laughing nervously.

But Pitch's expression didn't change, and Jack shook his head, anger flashing through him. He didn't want to feel bad for his centre changing. He *had* changed, but he was still himself. His skin still ached for the warmth of Pitch's skin against his own.

He cast around for something else to say, neutral subjects, and stumbled over the torn edges of August's compulsion. He froze, eyes widening. He mentally stepped away from it, tried to ignore the urge he felt to tell Pitch about what had happened. There was so much Pitch didn't know. The encounter with August, the visit to the Nain Rouge and Makara. It wasn't just one lie, but a chain of lies. It made Jack's heart twinge – as soon as he'd met Makara, he'd pushed himself into a corner where he'd find it too easy to lie to him the next time he saw him. He might not be able to see Makara for a while. The very openness that Makara had lauded him for, was harder to access.

Pitch turned back to look over the Workshop, and Jack scratched at the back of his head.

'Well, for what it's worth, I'm sorry I wasn't there the other night. With your nightmares. I didn't think I'd sleep so long.'

'Maybe you needed it,' Pitch said, without looking at him.

'Maybe,' Jack acknowledged. 'So, okay, tell me something. Right now, are you wanting to...gut me right now? Is that a constant thing?'

'No,' Pitch said, closing his eyes. 'It's not constant. And it's not occurring as of this moment.'

Jack couldn't think of anything else to say after that. His concentration was fraying in the bright loudness of the Workshop. In the end he left without saying farewell. He flew down to the round table room to wait for Gwyn.

\*

Jack had iced the whole table, the table legs and the floor beneath when Gwyn finally arrived. The King of the Seelie fae looked around the empty room and then closed the double doors so that he and Jack had some privacy. He wasn't wearing his battle armour, though his sword was strapped to his side. He pulled up a wooden chair next to Jack and sat down, looking grim as usual.

'If August has a master plan, I can't find anyone who knows of it. At some point, we may have to consider asking Pitch about what he remembers from his time as Nightmare King, in order to decipher what August may be planning next.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, reluctantly. 'The Nightmare King...implied that he shoved Pitch pretty far down. And Pitch said the same thing, so I'm not sure what he remembers. But it's worth a try.'

'August has a competent messenger network,' Gwyn said. 'Chances are high that if you visit Kostroma, your shack, or any other familiar place, he will know very quickly. We have been working to shut the network down, but he is offering incentives to lesser Unseelie fae, and they will do almost anything to increase their status and therefore their power. The one who chased you was a wind-fae who had been promised status increase for his trouble.'

Jack shivered and then scowled at the table, wanting to dig his nails into something.

'So I'm trapped here still,' Jack said. 'Look, I know it's like every kid's dream or something to be here, and I used to think that too, but it's-'

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, nodding abruptly. ‘I understand. I am working on it, but demoting a King is not an easy task, especially as Augus is so powerful.’

Jack scrutinised him over the crook of his staff. He remembered, a long time ago, realising that Augus and Gwyn had a history together. Gwyn always seemed like he couldn’t quite believe he was talking about demoting the Each Uisge. He wondered how much that weighed on Gwyn’s mind; if fae actually cared about things like that. He couldn’t imagine Augus and Gwyn on a Wild Hunt together, and if Gwyn hadn’t confirmed it himself, he would have thought he was being lied to.

‘Why is he so powerful? Did he do that...initiation thing you brought up? The one where a fae will sometimes split their powers to become stronger?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, eyebrows rising. ‘No. Most fae would never do that to themselves. Augus, in particular, has too much self-preservation to undergo such a rite. The Each Uisge was simply born with an immense locus of power. It happens sometimes. Not all fae are born equal.’

Jack traced a whirl of frost over the table. It was more jagged than usual, creating sharp, uneven lines on the wood.

‘Gwyn, you said that the beam of golden light probably made me stronger. A little while ago, before everything happened, Augus visited Pitch in Kostroma and...Pitch attacked him with the golden light. It didn’t affect him in a bad way, because he didn’t have any of the shadows with him at the time. But, could that have made him stronger?’

Gwyn shook his head after a beat.

‘If it did, it would likely have been negligible. The focused beam from North’s weapons are potent. Simply creating a wave of golden light has done nothing to the trees or other living objects that have received it, that I can tell. I imagine it’s the difference between receiving a static shock, or being struck by a bolt of lightning.’

Gwyn paused, then looked down to the table.

‘You’re handling this surprisingly well. Which leads me to think that you are not handling this well at all.’

‘What?’ Jack said, frowning.

‘Augus following you. I am beginning to think we have made an error in judgement, that perhaps it may be worth reconsidering what we tell Pitch, and how-’

‘Pitch is *unstable*,’ Jack hissed. ‘If you think this will help push him in the right direction, then you haven’t been hanging around him enough. And I’m handling it, okay? You just figure out a way to make sure A-Augus isn’t King anymore.’

Gwyn glared at Jack in that particular way he reserved for when he bristled against Jack telling him what to do. Jack supposed not many members of his Court did that. A moment later, Gwyn sighed and looked out of the arched window nearby. There was no shimmer of dra’ocht around him at all anymore, he looked worn. Jack felt unexpectedly sorry for him.

‘Are fae still dying?’ Jack said quietly, and Gwyn closed his eyes slowly, and then his brow furrowed.

‘Yes. Not as many, now. But enough. And I am no longer certain that Augus has a master plan. I



had assumed some grand design, but information gathered over the past few days leads me to believe that he may not have any sort of fallback now that the Nightmare King and the vast majority of the shadows have been defeated. It doesn't seem right that this could be the case, but it may well be. It is not how I would run my Court. But, this only means he is free to follow his whims to the bitter end. I will be consulting with Gulvi on the matter.'

'Because of her connection to Ash?' Jack said, remembering that she'd only switched alliances temporarily to make sure that she could protect Ash. Gwyn nodded once.

'Yeah,' Jack said, at the cold look on Gwyn's face, 'remind me not to get on your bad side.'

'You have no family to attack you through,' Gwyn said, offering Jack a mirthless smile. 'August does. And I have heard tell of a rumour that Ash is worried about his brother and his state of mind. That is a weakness. And one I know how to use.'

'You think you can get him to betray his brother, don't you?' Jack said.

'If he thinks he is doing it for the right reasons, then yes. And fortunately for us, Ash is not always the brightest, especially if he's worried for August. But Ash will not listen to me or my Court without Gulvi there. And he may not even listen to us then.'

Gwyn stood, sighed, and then ran his hand over the smooth slick of frost on the table.

'I'll collect the others. I would like to speak to Pitch with the others present. We may as well not waste anymore time.'

\*

Pitch sat between North and Gwyn. Jack sat next to Sandy, who was already starting to doze after sleepily and enthusiastically waving a greeting at Jack. Bunnymund sat nearby with a couple of chairs between himself and anyone else. It was strange to see Bunnymund and Pitch in the same room together, stranger still that Bunnymund seemed oddly tolerant of his presence. His ears were lowered defensively, but Jack wouldn't have called the position hostile.

Jack didn't have much to say as Gwyn brought everyone else up to speed. Gwyn carefully avoided talking about what had happened to Jack, and didn't mention his encounter with Makara. Jack watched North and Bunnymund, and could tell that both were aware that they were not being told everything. He wondered how often North and Bunnymund spoke to each other, trying to decipher what was actually going on. He realised, with some dismay, that they probably did that a lot.

He caught Pitch looking at him a couple of times; once when Jack nodded in response to something Gwyn had said, and then when he turned as North posed a question to the group. He didn't know what the expression meant. Pitch appeared confused, his mouth pursed, eyes narrowed. But Jack didn't know what he had to be confused about.

'Are you needing more of these golden light weapons from me?' North said, and Gwyn's mouth twisted.

'I'm not sure. Theoretically, there's only two people in the world who can use them. Two people, two weapons; so I'm not sure.'

Pitch cleared his throat. He shifted reluctantly as attention turned towards him.

'Technically – currently – there's only one person in the world who can make the light.'

Jack was surprised Pitch had spoken at all. Pitch stared down at his hands. Jack didn't mistake it for meekness, there was a cold, dark expression lurking on his face.

'I haven't felt the golden light at all,' Pitch said. 'Not since returning.'

'That doesn't mean it's gone,' Gwyn said. 'I'd actually like for you to try making it again, at your convenience. The sooner the better, if possible.'

Jack frowned. He wasn't sure if Pitch would be able to find his way back to the golden light any time soon. Either Gwyn didn't understand how long it would likely take, or he simply wanted to keep Pitch occupied and give him a job to do. If it was the latter, Jack thought that made some sense. Especially while they were still trapped. Pitch seemed to do better with a goal in mind.

'In answer to your question, North,' Gwyn continued. 'For now, we only need the two. But for future reference, are they hard to make?'

'They are not being too hard. But Christmas is coming closer, and so if you would like to put in special request, please to be making it over the next four weeks, yes? Do not delay. After that, I *must* put the children, and only the children first.'

Jack felt a cool flush of guilt. He didn't even know how to put children first anymore. Perhaps there was some ritual he could perform or words he could speak to remove his Guardian status. He didn't feel like he was the Guardian of anything. North and Bunnymund had formal holidays associated with their Guardianship. Toothiana had her teeth. Sandy had his good dreams. Once Jack had felt like they were making a mistake, thinking he could be a Guardian. Now he was sure of it. He wondered if the Man in the Moon had been entirely sane even then, giving him – out of everyone – all that power.

'Jack?' Gwyn said, calling his attention back to the meeting.

'I'm sorry, what?' Jack said, realising that he'd sunk so deeply into his own thoughts, he'd lost track of the conversation. The others were all looking at him, except for Sandy, who was sleeping with his forehead resting on the table.

'I was saying that I recall Pitch talking about how your snowballs helped kick-start a battle quality golden light. Could you do that again?'

Jack's eyes narrowed, and he turned to look at Pitch. *Could he?* He hadn't tried making them at all since he'd used them to help children escape during the battle at the gymnasium. A lot of time had passed since then, and he hadn't felt the inclination to make them once.

'Sure,' Jack said. 'Sure. I can do that whenever.'

But he wasn't sure, and he didn't know if they would help. Pitch was only recently rescued from the grip of the living shadows, it might be years before he was able to make the golden light.

Pitch leaned back in his chair and turned his attention to Gwyn .

'I'd like to return to Kostroma, if I may. I feel moving somewhere quieter may speed my adjustment in learning how to be...this, again.'

Jack laughed before he could stop himself. He shook his head in disbelief, small prickles flared into life underneath his skin.

'Are you serious? No way. *No way!* After all we went through to get you back? You're not going

*anywhere.'*

Pitch's eyes widened in shock, and Jack swallowed when he realised what he'd just said. He was growing to hate those words, no matter what form they came in. But the anger didn't dissipate, so he continued.

'You're staying right here, where someone can keep an eye on you. I mean, if anyone else thinks you going back to Kostroma is a great idea, let's hear from them about it.'

He stared around the table. North seemed surprised at Jack's outburst. But Bunnymund and Gwyn exchanged a look.

'I think Jack is right,' Gwyn said. 'I don't think it's wise that you isolate yourself, at this time. I know the circumstances at this time aren't ideal, but I've seen your new room. They are already quite isolated by the Workshop's standards.'

'You think you could stop me?' Pitch said silkily. 'What's to stop me from leaving right now?'

Bunnymund stiffened in his chair, but it was Jack who stood up and flew backwards, sweeping his staff in a gesture of disgust.

'Go back to Kostroma then. Put yourself at risk. If that's how little you care about being possessed by the shadows again, if you *miss them so much*, then do it. We'll come after you again, and it'll be easier the second time, because so many of those shadows are actually gone now. I'm not sure how much of *you* will be left though.'

Pitch's mouth dropped open, and then he quickly schooled his face to a glare that Jack would have once found menacing. Jack decided that even though his centre had changed, group meetings with Gwyn and the Guardians and Pitch were still awful.

'I'm done,' he turned to Gwyn. 'If you need me, come find me later.'

He flew out, needed space but couldn't just *escape*. He went into one of the more private, lower-floor rooms. It was filled with stuffed armchairs, a huge fireplace with no fire in the hearth. A Christmas tree decorated with fantastic items that would never have been possible in the human world. He tried to calm his breathing once he landed, wondering what was wrong with him. One moment he wanted to repair everything, to be gentle, to be patient, and the next moment he felt immersed in a strange, unbearable anger that he just wanted to get out of himself by throwing it at the nearest target. It wasn't like him. He used to get angry in the past, but never like this.

He leaned his staff against the wall and lifted up his sweater, making sure the scarf was in place. He checked it at least twenty times a day, and it was becoming a bad habit. He lowered his sweatshirt and froze when he heard an exclamation of shock behind him.

He whirled around, and Bunnymund stood in the entrance, staring.

'Mate, tell me that is *not* one of Makara's scarves?'

*Oh shit. Oh no. Bunnymund what is it with you at the moment?*

'I'm just trying something new when it comes to accessorising,' Jack hedged quickly and Bunnymund looked behind him before loping slowly into the room, staring at Jack in shock.

'What are you hiding? What are you hiding from *him*?'

‘Leave it alone,’ Jack said quickly. ‘Don’t say anything about it. It’s important this stays quiet.’

‘This part of that big secret that Gwyn’s keeping a lid on, right? Crikey. Did you go see him? That Unseelie monster?’

‘Hey,’ Jack said, looking over Bunnymund’s shoulder to make sure none of the others were following. ‘Don’t say that. Makara’s not a monster.’

‘Take a breather, mate. I’m on my own. No one else is coming. And didn’t he appear like a monster to you?’

‘You’ve met him?’ Jack said, and Bunnymund nodded slowly. ‘Why? What did – did you need a scarf?’

‘No,’ Bunnymund said. ‘It was back when- It was a long time ago. You wouldn’t have even been knee high to a grasshopper. Back when I was more about magic and less about Easter. I wanted to know how he grew things. He has this amazing, incredible garden. Oh, mate, you would not *believe* his green thumb. I learned a lot from him. Some of that magic went towards building my own home, if you can believe it.’

Bunnymund’s face had completely transformed. His eyes squinted wistfully, and he smiled.

Jack worried about what Bunnymund would say to the others, and still couldn’t shake his guilt for antagonising Pitch in the meeting, in front of everyone. He’d just wanted to *hurt* him for even suggesting going to Kostroma. Jack wasn’t used to treating people like that, and he didn’t want to do it again.

‘Why can’t he know?’ Bunnymund said seriously, and Jack shook his head.

‘Don’t try and figure this one out, Bunny. Your instincts have been off about him, and us, since the beginning.’

‘Woah, mate,’ Bunnymund held up both of his paws. ‘Back off a tick. I’m just trying to understand. I’m not trying to assume anything.’

Jack took a deep, shaky breath, then a shallower one. He needed to get out of there. But there was no where he could really go to escape in the Workshop. There were elves and yeti and his room was filled with memories and-

‘Jack,’ Bunnymund said. ‘Don’t chuck a wobbly. Look at me.’

Jack looked reluctantly up at Bunnymund, who had edged closer. He looked concerned, and it was a strange expression to see on his face, especially directed at Jack. Bunnymund’s face fell, his ears drooped.

‘Jack, I’m worried,’ he said. ‘Will you just-’

‘*Leave* it!’ Jack said, voice rising, and Bunnymund’s eyes narrowed, a flicker of anger alit upon his features.

‘Not this again. Fine, don’t talk about it. Just *stay* for a minute, will you? Take a breather.’

‘I don’t want to,’ Jack said automatically. But he did. He didn’t know where else he could go. He didn’t feel safe enough to simply leave and find a forest to hide in. Gwyn had called it a ‘competent messenger network,’ but all Jack heard was that even with his powers back, he couldn’t freely

travel until the current situation was sorted out. He hadn't realised how much he needed that, how important it was to him as a frost spirit, until he couldn't do it anymore.

'Christ, Jack. Be honest. Whatever it is you're not telling us, at least tell me you're *dealing* with it? Do you want to run away from me? Or is this about running away from whatever *that* is supposed to be hiding?' Bunnymund pointed at the hidden scarf for emphasis.

Jack rubbed at his forehead, and then wrapped a hand around his ribs, a reflexive gesture that he hadn't been able to shake since August had attacked him.

'I don't feel like myself anymore,' Jack said, looking at Bunnymund and not even knowing why he was bothering to say anything at all. It's not like Bunnymund ever really *heard* him.

'Your centre changed, mate. It takes time,' Bunnymund said, and Jack shook his head, laughed under his breath.

'I don't think it's that. My centre was changing before this. Apparently it started a while ago. Maybe it started before Jamie died, I don't know.'

'About that-'

'Don't,' Jack said, laughing, voice strained. 'Just don't.'

Bunnymund sighed and sat on his haunches, then shifted so that he could keep a watch on the door, noticing that Jack couldn't stop checking every twenty or thirty seconds. With Bunnymund watching the door, Jack bowed his tense neck and rubbed at the back of it, fingers skimming over the tiny hairline scar. He shivered.

Jack's breathing hitched and he pulled his hand away, leaning heavily on his staff.

'I don't feel right,' Jack said, looking at the side of Bunnymund's face. 'I didn't want to get angry at him like that. He didn't deserve that. God, even *I* wish I was back in Kostroma.'

Bunnymund's fur flattened in response, and then shifted back normally a moment later. He grimaced and then scratched at his whiskers.

'I'm not surprised you lost your patience, he was carrying on like a pork chop.'

'I don't expect you – of all people – to understand,' Jack said, frowning. 'He really doesn't deserve that sort-'

'What, you're supposed to be perfect all the time?' Bunnymund said, turning around and scowling at Jack. 'It's obvious you've gotten the rough end of the pineapple, mate. You can have a bad day. I seem to have them in abundance, these days, so we can share if you like.'

Jack laughed in spite of himself. It was a low, faint sound. He sighed and straightened, three days of sleep and still over-reacting at the slightest provocation.

'I do care,' Bunnymund said, abruptly. 'It's not an *act*, you daft galah. I made the mistake of taking you at face value. I didn't realise you are a first class bloody act when it came to lying.'

'What?' Jack said, blinking. 'Lying? About what?'

'You remember that first time we met? You were a right larrikin. There was no sign that- How was I supposed to know how things were for you? How was anyone?'

'Makara said I was open...' Jack said, and Bunnymund nodded, smirking.

'Not with me, you're not. Not with *Pitch* either, now. There's only one person you'd need a scarf to block off your fears for. Maybe that's why you feel so off colour. You can't hide something so big, whatever it is, and expect it won't change you. It's bad alchemy, Jack.'

'You don't understand,' Jack said.

'Maybe more than you'd think,' Bunnymund replied, scratching behind one of his ears. Then, unexpectedly, he burst into laughter. 'Crikey, you really went and visited him didn't you? Makara? That's where you were for those few days, wasn't it? Bloody India? Under the Ganges?'

Jack nodded, taking a deep breath.

'He made me new clothes,' Jack said, pulling at the fine material of his sweatshirt.

'Well, that's lovely, isn't it? Why'd you need new clothes, then?' Bunnymund said, and Jack paused and then let go of his sweatshirt.

He wasn't supposed to be talking about these things.

'Please don't tell anyone,' Jack said. 'Not even North. I know you two talk about everything.'

'He's way ahead of me, mate,' Bunnymund said. 'He's savvy, that one. But I'll keep your secrets, I've got enough of my own, don't I?'

Bunnymund thumped his foot on the ground absently, nervously.

'You right?' he said, finally.

'What?'

'Are you alright?'

'I...oh,' Jack blinked at him, bemused. 'Better, I think,' Jack said.

Bunnymund nodded decisively.

'Good. I gotta get going. Just don't be a stranger. I'm trying.'

'I can tell,' Jack said, nodded. 'I appreciate it.'

'Not yet you don't,' Bunnymund said, a knowing expression on his face. 'You got too many other things to focus on. But maybe you will. Rightio. I'm off.'

Bunnymund loped out of the room, leaving Jack alone with his thoughts.

\*

Later that evening, past midnight, Jack made his way to Pitch's room. Mora came with him, and he couldn't tell if it was because she was enjoying Pitch's company, or if she wanted to offer moral support to Jack. *Maybe both*, Jack realised. She'd always had a soft spot for the both of them.

He crept in and leaned his staff against the wall. Mora turned in a slow circle, and then lay down carefully. In the dim, night light, the tiny grains of sand that made her body caught and reflected a dull blue back at him. He looked over at the sleeping form of Pitch, and then sat so that he was

leaning with his back against Mora in the dark. He folded his arms and breathed slowly through the fear she created. After a while it was just background noise, as always, and she turned her neck and rested her head in his lap, closing her eyes and cutting off yet another source of light in the room.

Jack stroked Mora's nose rhythmically. Frost curled slowly and gently up her face, and he brushed it away every now and then, finding new patterns for her. She breathed warm gusts over him, and the rise and fall of her torso was steady behind him. He wondered if she needed to breathe, or if – like him – it was some strange habit that they both couldn't break.

Mora dozed and Jack let his thoughts drift, watching Pitch sleep and wondering at what Bunnymund had said. Could the scarf be changing him, somehow? Makara, too, had talked about the alchemy of hiding or revealing one's fears. And with Pitch, in the past, every single fear that Jack would have thought to hide, to be ashamed of, Pitch saw them all easily and accepted them without anything more than occasionally pushing to know more about a subject.

But this was different. He'd be naive to think otherwise. Augus *wanted* him to tell Pitch, he wanted it to be yet another weapon against a fragile warrior.

Around four in the morning, Pitch's nightmares began. He didn't move, but his breathing was faster, and Mora woke and shivered, alert to the shift in energy. Jack walked over to the bed, sitting on the small space left on the mattress. He frowned and reached out, hesitant. He placed fingertips on Pitch's hair, and then curled his hand down until he could lay his palm on Pitch's shoulder. Pitch was wearing an undershirt, the material thin and the curve of skin beneath it radiating warmth.

'Hey, Pitch,' Jack said, making his voice quiet. 'I'm here. It's gonna be alright.'

He waited, watched. He didn't like to shake Pitch out of his nightmares, he suspected that was when Pitch was most likely to be violent or unpredictable; the disoriented moment between wake and sleep. But waiting them out was hard. The irony wasn't lost on Jack, that the former Nightmare King was plagued with so many nightmares every evening. After all, those living shadows didn't have the monopoly on bad dreams. Even if they were all defeated, children would need Sandy to help them out, they would still wake up in the night screaming for their parents.

Just maybe not as often.

Half an hour crawled by, and Pitch murmured a few half-words, distress evident in his voice. His muscles tensed and released. At one point, he started trembling. Jack raised his hand to Pitch's hair at that, and murmured things like 'shhh,' and 'it's okay,' even though it was plain that things weren't okay at all.

Pitch jerked in fear, the motion woke him. His eyes flew open, golden irises less bright due to pupils blown with terror.

Jack withdrew his hand, carefully, once Pitch noticed he was there.

Jack inhaled when Pitch reached out and took Jack's hand in his own. Fingers interlaced with his.

'Jack,' Pitch said, brow furrowing. He seemed uncertain. The warm fingers around his hand were tender.

Jack attempted something like a smile, and Pitch blinked up at him, vision clearing. Pitch didn't smile, but something eased in his face, and he relaxed back into the bed. He squeezed his hand around Jack's, pressing his thumb into Jack's palm.

The warmth of affection was doused by an abrupt, cold queasiness.

His vision blurred, and he tried to take a deep breath, tried to focus, but instead he felt a damp, lukewarm hand over his own, replacing Pitch's warmth. He felt his arm being twisted behind his back and a cold, malicious voice saying:

*'Ice it.'*

Jack's hand went into spasm and he yanked it from Pitch's grip, gasping hoarsely, feeling invisible blood drip over his fingers. And then August, as clearly as if he were right there:

*'...You are the poorest excuse for a frost spirit I've ever met.'*

Jack stumbled backwards into Mora, and then bent over himself, trying to clear his head, calm his breathing. He was already forcing himself to straighten when Pitch swung his legs out of the bed, a bewildered expression on his face.

'Jack?' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head, shook it again.

'N-nothing. Sorry. N-'

'Did I hurt you?' Pitch said, and Jack was confused, because he thought it was pretty obvious that he was flooded with fear. Then he realised with a jolt that Pitch didn't *know*. In the absence of feeling Jack's fear, he would have presumed other emotions, even with the evidence of fear before him. Pitch had spent countless years taking for granted his ability to read the fears of others, that he might not even know how to associate the body language of a panic attack with the emotion anymore, if he couldn't sense the fear internally himself.

Jack's eyes squeezed shut. Some horrified, lonely part of himself wanted Pitch to *know* exactly what had happened. He leaned weakly against Mora and scratched at her neck, trying to rub the ghostly sensation of August off his palm with her sandpaper skin.

'You didn't hurt me,' Jack said, but Pitch didn't look convinced.

Jack slid sideways and sat down on the floor, against the wall, drawing his legs up.

'It's just a thing that happens sometimes, now,' Jack said, because that was the only way he could offer an explanation without betraying himself. And Pitch, who was normally so attuned to people's fears that he would have seen straight past Jack's lie, instead leaned back against the wall uncertainly, crossing his legs and watching Jack. Makara's scarf was working, and Pitch had no idea what had just happened. He was oddly blind to fear related body language.

Jack felt like he was committing a crime. This was not the way things were supposed to be between them. He was angry at himself for even reacting in this way; uncomfortable, prickly irritation raced through him. He didn't know what was happening to him. Why now? Pitch had laced his fingers through Jack's, it had been *nice*, and then it had been- Jack tried to focus on something else.

'What were you dreaming about?' Jack said, and Pitch shifted on the bed.

'The gymnasium. I do suppose you could call it a recurring theme, at this point.'

'Is it...always the same?' Jack said, flexing his hand uncertainly to make sure the strange, phantom touch was gone.

'No,' Pitch said, bending one knee up and resting his forearm on it. 'Sometimes it's...me being



taken by the shadows. Sometimes it's- Sometimes I was not fast enough to save you.'

Jack shuddered. He remembered how close he'd come to being completely possessed by the shadows, in the gymnasium. The Nain Rouge's taunting and the horrible sensation of something deadly and malicious pushing up through his foot, wrapping around the inside of his ankle.

'Oh,' Jack breathed, placing his hands in his lap.

'I still think, now, that perhaps I didn't save you,' Pitch said slowly.

Jack blinked at him.

'What are you talking about?'

'Your centre is completely altered. You are no longer carefree. Gwyn told me that you trained, extensively. I didn't believe him, at first. Jack Frost? The carefree, fun-loving Jack Frost *training*? He even made it sound as though you were building new drills together, and...' Pitch stared as Jack didn't contradict him.

'At that point, we needed to,' Jack said, spreading his hands. 'Gwyn's golden light was weak and...the Nightmare King was *not* weak. Working with him wasn't like doing it instinctively with you. You made the golden light look easy, but Gwyn, well, we had to come up with something different. Funny thing though, we didn't end up using any of it in the final plan. But if we need to again, at least we have some new techniques figured out, so that's something.'

'Is it?' Pitch said, sounding doubtful.

'Things were bad, Pitch. You weren't here.'

Jack curled in on himself slightly.

'And that plan,' Pitch continued, an edge in his voice. 'The weapons, the idea for them, breaking down the sword, my dau- *That* plan.'

Jack wrapped an arm around his knees and looked into the shadows in the corner of the room.

'I did what I had to do, to get you back. Things were dire, Pitch. They were *really* dire.'

Pitch sighed, and Jack shook his head.

'We were on a deadline. I-'

'What deadline? As far as I was aware, defeating the-'

'I was dying,' Jack said, voice small. 'If you hadn't returned my powers when you did- I mean, Gwyn and I, and then North and the others, none of us expected me to survive bringing you back. Alright? And none of the others were as focused as I was when it came to making sure you'd be okay, even Gwyn. He likes you okay, but he's been flat out with the Seelie Court. So I couldn't leave it. I had to make sure we got you back, or at least, that I made the attempt before I died. The deadline had nothing to do with the Nightmare King. It was me. I needed it.'

Pitch stared, and then moved until his knees were off the bed. He leaned forward, eyes wide, hands tense.

'*Dying*,' Pitch said, and Jack raised his arm weakly.

‘But I’m not now,’ he said.

Pitch closed his eyes, he took a deep breath, another, and then his eyes opened again.

‘And so you were,’ Pitch said. ‘You were certain you were going to die. And afraid of it.’

Jack laughed.

‘More afraid that we weren’t going to get you back, actually.’

‘I can’t read your fears properly,’ Pitch said, and Jack felt his skin crawl. ‘You tell me that you were dying, and then I can reach for it and confirm that it is true. But it is not like before. I never thought that you, of all people, would...’

‘What?’ Jack whispered.

‘Learn how to cage them so.’

Jack’s heart felt like a bruise. He shifted around the huge, heavy weight in his chest.

‘I find myself thinking that I won’t go back to Kostroma, at this time,’ Pitch said, and Jack looked up at him, surprised.

‘Why the sudden change of heart?’

‘I think perhaps I’m needed here.’ Pitch’s voice was quiet, and he looked at Jack through tired, half-lidded eyes. It was a measuring gaze, and Jack wondered what Pitch saw.

‘You’ll have to bear with me,’ Pitch said, and Jack squinted in confusion. ‘My mind is more of a mess these days, than it usually is. Things are not as peachy keen as they once were.’

Jack huffed a small breath of laughter.

‘Your mind has always been a mess.’

‘So kind of you to say so,’ Pitch said, and Jack hid a smile in his forearm when he heard an old, familiar warmth in Pitch’s voice. That, and Pitch’s pledge to stay and ‘keep an eye on things,’ made Jack almost dare to feel something like hope. But he held it back, just in case. After all, Pitch had said it himself; his mind was still a mess. And things always seemed to look more hopeful up in Pitch’s room, in the stillness of night, instead of during the day in the chaos of the Workshop.

‘I’m afraid if Gwyn wants the golden light again, I may need your help,’ Pitch said, and Jack looked up.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ Jack said. ‘It affected you a lot last time, to start working with it again. I don’t think now is the right-’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, ‘will you help me?’

Jack closed his eyes, because really, how could he say no to such a plainly put question? He hadn’t felt like making snowballs in a long time, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t.

‘Sure,’ Jack said. ‘I guess.’

Pitch nodded and then stifled a yawn. Jack realised that he was probably still tired, and he stood up, picking up his staff from where it was leaning against the wall.

‘What do you do, after you leave?’ Pitch said, and Jack paused on his way out.

‘Uh, well, I go back to my room and normally just wait until morning.’

‘You could wait here,’ Pitch said, and Jack looked back at Pitch.

‘You could come back to your old room.’

They watched each other quietly, and in the end neither replied.

Still, as Jack flew back down to his room, he was struck by how oddly companionable it had been. Things weren’t the same, but as he lay on his bed and watched frost curl up the wall behind his head, he thought things were moving in a better direction.

He tried hard to ignore the darker memories lurking behind that hope. But his hand still tingled where Augus’ phantom hand had pressed into it. His fingers felt as though they were covered with his own blood. He wondered when he’d ever move past what happened to him.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'I Think You Should Tell Him,' Pitch begins to slowly pull himself back together again, now having something to focus on. Jack and Pitch make steps towards repairing their relationship, but how far can they get, with Jack determined to hide so much of himself?

# I Think You Should Tell Him

## Chapter Notes

Ahhh, thank you so much for your kudos and bookmarks and subscriptions, and thank you ever so much for your comments!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next day, Pitch asked if Jack would join him in the training arena to make the golden light. Jack thought Pitch seemed more rested than before, though there was a persistent, drawn quality about his face. His golden eyes were paler than usual, and the dark smudges under his eyes hadn't left. The embroidery had not fully returned to his robes. There were four small patches – more than before – but that was all.

He didn't know if he'd feel like Pitch was properly himself until the robe showed the embroidery, the lunar alphabet.

Jack waited in the training arena. He stared at the abundance of snow around him, and tested it with his feet. It was old, compacted snow, not the good stuff. He swept his staff and made heavy flurries fall down. Fat snowflakes, filled with air, landed in small piles around him. *There, that's awesome.*

He dragged his staff across the side of the Workshop. Frost spirals coiled up the walls, ending with long, heavy icicles hanging from the underside of windowsills. He made icicles more easily now, and wondered if it was due to the golden light's influence, or that of the Nain Rouge – she'd used his powers to make icicles, after all. He looked at them, sharp and wicked, and felt a small thrill of satisfaction when he saw them. People could mess with a frost spirit who only made snow, but icicles? That was a different story.

Pitch walked out, holding the double-bladed battle-axe in one hand, and Jack grimaced to see it.

'You know, Gwyn doesn't use a sword made from that metal, and he can still make the light? Maybe you should just- Maybe we should get you another-'

'This specific metal increases the chances that I can make the light,' Pitch said, looking at the lunar alphabet where it had been embedded into the black flats of the blades. 'I need all the *help* I can get.'

But the look he directed at the axe made Jack wonder how much help it could possibly be.

'In the meantime, it appears you've had an abrupt change of taste in fashion,' Pitch said, indicating Jack's new sweatshirt, his new pants. Jack nodded, tugging on the drawstring of his hoodie uncertainly.

'Let me guess,' Pitch said. 'It was time for a change.'

'North has this huge collection of them,' Jack said, which felt like a safe lie, because it was actually true. 'In all different colours. If you give him enough time, he'll probably try and copy the design of those robes and give you a bunch more. Maybe he has already and just hasn't told you

yet.'

'Wonderful,' Pitch said, shaking his head in despair. Jack smiled in spite of himself.

'Maybe you should do a couple of drills with the axe first, and see how it feels?' Jack said, raising his eyebrows. Pitch smirked.

'Should I? When did you get in the habit of telling other people what to do during training?'

Jack flushed blue, and looked up at a long row of icicles.

'Gwyn let me take charge,' Jack said, awkwardly, 'It was the only way we could train together. But...I'm right, aren't I? At least get used to how it moves first? It's weight is all at the end, it must feel different.'

Pitch gave Jack a long, considering look, and then nodded, stepping out into the training arena. The axe had a long range, so Jack hopped into the air and sat directly on a windowsill, out of the way.

Pitch was still for long minutes. He had the axe in a double-handed grip, and for all that he loathed the weapon, he looked familiar with battle-axes all the same. Jack wondered how many weapons Pitch was trained in. During his first incarnation as the Nightmare King, he'd been proficient in every weapon he'd created with the dark, black sand he'd possessed.

The drill Pitch stepped into was one that Jack hadn't seen before. That didn't surprise him. Before the battle at the gymnasium, Jack hadn't watched most of Pitch's training sessions with Gwyn, preferring to stay out of their way.

Pitch handled the axe like he had always used one. It was only when he swept it down and it hammered into the ground with a surprising amount of force that his eyes widened in surprise, and Jack realised Pitch was still getting used to the feel of it. Pitch wrenched it up out of the compacted snow, and began to move once more. The more Jack watched, the more awe crept over him. He didn't want to like the weapon, but he couldn't help it. It turned into a dark blur in Pitch's hands, the silver of the axe blades catching the light. Pitch adjusted his hands on the handle several times and seemed to find a grip that he liked, and when he spun to gain momentum before deliberately using his weight to send it thudding into the earth, Jack realised he *did* like the axe.

Pitch, however, left it in the ground and took a step back from it, staring in disgust. Jack hopped off the windowsill and flew down to the axe, it was in no danger of coming out of the ground any time soon. It had penetrated permafrost.

'Was it like, badly made or something?' Jack said, and Pitch shook his head.

'Axes are not my preferred choice of weapon. I would have preferred a damned *scythe*.'

Jack laughed out on a single breath.

'You're already Grim Reaper enough for my tastes, Pitch.'

Pitch glared at Jack, glared at the axe. He wrenched it out of the ground once more, twisting it slowly in his fingers.

'I thought you said you liked weapons that got the job done,' Jack said, remembering back to a conversation they'd had in a meeting, a long time ago.

'Axes are...' Pitch trailed off and then gave Jack a look that he couldn't read. 'They were not

weapons of status, where I come from.'

'And the longsword was?'

'Yes,' Pitch said.

'So you hate the axe because what, it makes you feel like you're low in status? I mean, geez, it was the best we could do at the time, okay?'

'I *dislike* the axe,' Pitch seethed, 'because it was once an elegant, graceful *sword*. And *this* is nothing but a glorified hatchet.'

He swung it over his shoulders, and then straight back into the ground. Jack felt the ground shake under his feet at the impact. He realised then – what had they planned for Pitch to do with a weapon like this? Kill dragons? Become a lumberjack? He would cut people in *half*.

'Gwyn made a mistake,' Jack said, looking at the axe in dismay. He was the one who had taken the sword to the Glasera, it was *his* opinion the Glasera had initially asked for, wasn't it? He'd let his insecurities get the better of him, let Gwyn talk his way to a weapon that wasn't right. 'It was me, I did this. We could have made it anything.'

'Why did you not think to preserve the metal as an ingot, for later?' Pitch said, face twisting. Jack shook his head.

'You don't understand. The Glasera dwarves have all these stupid *rules*. You can only take a weapon up the mountain *once*. And they will only work on it *once*. Like, if we went back now, with any of this, they'd just laugh at us and say, 'Have a nice day.' Oh and we'd get tossed off the mountain. And it's a *tall* mountain. We had to make a decision, and they're not all like 'Take your time and have a think about it.' I didn't expect for there to be so much metal left over, and I went from thinking we'd be restricted to maybe a couple of daggers for you, to- There were a lot of options. But the ingot wasn't one of them.'

'I daresay it wouldn't have worked, even so. The metal wouldn't last another reworking. For future reference, if you happen to stumble across another precious, invaluable artefact from my past, I would recommend *not* turning it into something that's designed solely for chopping down trees and people.'

Jack's hand clenched. He had a scar down his back from carrying that sword, and it would never go away. He had spent so much of himself climbing that mountain, and he'd known at the time that he had to, there was no other choice. To have Pitch griping at him about it now...

'Oh, I'm sorry, does this *upset* you?' Pitch said, voice dark and smooth. Jack looked up in alarm, and there was a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

'If you're going to go all 'faux Nightmare King' on me, can you just let me know, so I can leave?'

Pitch stared at him, then blinked hard and straightened. He rubbed a hand over his face and took several deep breaths.

'I apologise,' he said, sounding more like himself. Jack exhaled the breath he'd been holding.

'Can we just do this? Get it over and done with?' Jack said, having lost patience, and Pitch wrenched up the axe once more.

Jack picked up some of the fluffy snow he'd created and shaped it into a snowball. He flicked his

fingers over the rest of the snow, and several more snowballs sprung into existence.

‘How do you want to do this?’ Jack said.

‘We’ll know soon enough if it will work. The snowballs work their magic immediately,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ll start a drill, and you can begin when you’re ready.’

Jack nodded, and Pitch immediately stepped into the drill.

Jack watched him for a few seconds, and then blew over the snowball, only to stop halfway through and stare at it. A creeping fear wound its way through him. He’d blown nothing except *air*. There had been no good feeling on that exhale, nothing. It wasn’t one of his snowballs, it was just a meaningless ball of snow. Anyone could have made it.

*Oh no.*

But North had said the fun was still in him somewhere, didn’t he? That it had to still be there? Just buried deep? Jack closed his eyes, concentrated, looked for some amount of good feeling. He told himself that Pitch was back, that they’d defeated the Nightmare King, that the horizon was actually far more hopeful than any of them had expected it could be, he was no longer in danger of dying, he...

He had nothing. He just didn’t feel *good*.

Jack’s breathing sped up, he stared at the snowballs piled by his side.

‘What’s wrong?’ Pitch said, walking over. Jack turned the snowball he held in his fingers, icing it over with a hard shell.

‘I can’t,’ Jack said. ‘I just...can’t.’

‘Jack...’ Pitch said, and Jack looked up at the tone in Pitch’s voice. He looked horrified. Jack tried to laugh it off, but he did a poor job of it.

‘No, it’s fine. My centre has changed. It’s fine.’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, resting the axe, blades down, on the snow. ‘Jack, it is my understanding that you only need good feeling to make those snowballs. Not a centre of *fun*.’

Jack’s heart started pounding a sharp tattoo in his chest. He didn’t want to have this conversation. He couldn’t believe that he couldn’t make a single one. That meant he couldn’t *help*. How would Pitch ever jump-start the light without him? He’d done something wrong, he was-

‘I can’t talk about this right now,’ Jack said, hopping up onto the winds.

‘*Jack*,’ Pitch said, and Jack couldn’t handle that tone in his voice. It was the same one that he’d heard when Pitch had realised that Jack had been dying.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said, and he flew away as quickly as he dared, leaving Pitch standing, alone, in the training arena.

\*

He avoided Pitch for the rest of the day. Avoided everyone. North’s Workshop was huge, a giant warren of creativity and noise. He spent an hour looking for the room he’d escaped to months ago, the one where the giant Christmas tree had grown through the ceiling into the next level. Once he

found it, tucked away and blessedly silent, he created snow in the room and climbed onto one of the thick, lower boughs of the tree. It felt almost like being in a forest again. He smelled pine, the snow felt familiar against him.

He curled up on the tree branch and stared at pine needles.

He was in trouble. He wanted Pitch to *see* him, and yet he couldn't think of anything worse. He wanted touch, and yet he knew from his reactions to North's gentle overtures, to Bunnymund touching him on the back, that touch was a minefield. He wanted to be able to create the snowballs, to feel something of fun again, and yet fun left him in a place where he couldn't stop Pitch from being possessed, where he couldn't *help* anyone.

Sleep was far away because he wasn't tired. But he didn't want to think about *anything*. He just wanted to drown everything in the black. He hunted inside of himself for that space of rest, and threw himself into it, wanting to not think anymore and not knowing how else to shut himself down.

He only managed a few hours before he woke again. His arms were hanging off the branch, staff was balanced loosely in his hand. Snow had fallen while he'd slept, icicles hung off the bough beneath him. He slid off the giant Christmas tree and sighed, checked the scarf – still in place, as always.

So he couldn't make the snowballs anymore, that could be okay. Kids had snowball fights all the time without him, they still had fun. And maybe Pitch was wrong. Maybe it *was* because his centre had changed. After all, he wasn't exactly resolved to make snowballs. And yet...

Yet he wanted Pitch to be able to make the golden light. He was resolved to help *Pitch*. He had assumed that if his resolve was pointing in that direction, the snowballs would have been possible.

Wanderlust picked at him. And, as he explored the Workshop quietly for the rest of the afternoon and evening, he stared longingly from the open windows, wondering how many of the Each Uisge's messenger network were out there, and how quickly Augus could arrive if Jack was sighted. The feeling of being trapped wore away at him.

Later that evening, when the stars were hanging quietly from the sky, and the moon was a Cheshire cat smile, Jack made his way to Pitch's room.

Pitch was already in the throes of a nightmare when Jack arrived. He walked over, unthinking, and Pitch snapped awake even as Jack was lowering himself carefully to the bed.

'Hey,' Jack said, and Pitch reached out for his hand automatically. Then, right before his fingers curled around Jack's skin – close enough that Jack could feel the heat of it – Pitch paused and looked at Jack closely, unsure.

Jack moved his hand from underneath Pitch's and placed it on top, curling his cold fingers over the back of Pitch's hand, offering something that would have been a smile in older times.

'The gymnasium?' Jack said, and Pitch nodded, looking down at the connection between them. Jack found this far easier, being able to hold Pitch's hand within his own. He stroked his fingers over skin, concentrating on not spilling his frost.

'None of us are possessed now though, huh?' Jack said, his voice softer than before. 'Does this help? Me coming here at night?'

'Does it help you?' Pitch said, turning his hand over and presenting his palm. Jack pressed his own



palm down, hungry for the warmth.

'I asked you first,' Jack said, and Pitch sat straighter, curling his fingertips up against Jack's wrist and leaving them there, a simple touch. It set Jack's heart-rate racing.

'It does help,' Pitch said, 'And you?'

'Yeah,' Jack said. 'This is like...the closest we've come to neutral territory.'

'Isn't it,' Pitch agreed.

Pitch's eyes and the night spilling in from outside were the only points of light in the room.

'Once,' Pitch said, voice deep and soothing, 'you threw a snowball at me, brat that you were. The magic in them, I didn't want to believe it possible. I had not thought I would be permitted to feel simple goodness again; it was straightforward and...innocent. Oh, I know you are no innocent, not even then, but in your core lurked this untouchable purity. Capable of fun even in the face of immense, crushing circumstance.'

Jack closed his eyes. Pitch stroked the underside of his wrist and the heel of his hand attentively. It felt good, warm...but it skated close to something else that could be unpleasant. He felt like he was holding his breath, and he didn't know why.

'You're afraid of me saying it,' Pitch said, 'Afraid that I will ask where the goodness has gone.'

'You're getting better at reading my fears then,' Jack said, thinking of the scarf around his middle and hoping Makara's magic would continue. Pitch nodded.

'Slowly. In all honesty, it has been difficult to read the fears of the other Guardians too, since I have returned. Everything is muddled. I suspect my sense of self is more shredded than it was the last time the shadows were removed. I don't know if I can survive possession again.'

Jack's eyes widened and his breath escaped him.

'Please tell me you're finding it easier to resist just...going on out there and getting possessed again, then.'

'One of us coming so close to dying is plenty, wouldn't you say? Excessive, even.'

'Is that why you think you can't make the golden light?' Jack said, 'Do you think it's gone? You thought that last time. You said it shouldn't have been able to stay through that darkness. Maybe it didn't this time.'

'These are my suspicions also. But if you had asked me last time if I could have made it, well, I didn't even *remember* it was there. As tempting as it is to say it is simply impossible, you have taught me I should never rule anything out.'

'I taught you that?' Jack said, smiling.

'You sound almost like yourself,' Pitch said, and Jack swallowed. He wanted to crawl up onto the bed. He wanted to drape himself over Pitch, fall asleep next to him like they had begun to do before, sometimes.

'I can't wait to be able to leave this Workshop,' Jack said, and Pitch nodded fervently.

'Isn't it infernal? But, alas, we cannot leave. Gwyn says the Each Uisge has patrols nearby. And

that you were attacked?’

‘Oh...yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I was fine though.’

‘You are *still* not nearly as scared of Augus as you should be.’

Jack’s laughter, cynical and abrasive, came before he could even stop it. He’d never had more proof that Makara’s scarf was working just fine. Pitch circled his fingers around Jack’s wrist loosely.

‘I don’t think it’s funny,’ Pitch said, reproachful.

Jack quelled his laughter, but couldn’t stop the dark mirth that curled through him.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said, ‘I just- You’re not the Nightmare King anymore. The Nain Rouge has been pretty much defeated. My powers are back and I’m stronger than ever. Just, how scared do you think I’m gonna be after that?’

*There*, Jack thought, *that sounded convincing*.

Still, Jack lifted his wrist out of the loose circle Pitch held it in. He didn’t like to feel restrained. He settled it back once Pitch’s fingers relaxed.

*Not nearly as scared of Augus as you should be...*

Pitch had worked so hard to make Jack keep his guard up around Augus, and Jack had never paid close attention, seeing the Nain Rouge as the only significant threat in the Unseelie Court.

Jack felt a wash of nausea move through him.

Could he have avoided what happened to him if he’d just paid attention earlier? Perhaps if he’d been on his guard, properly, he never would have skated so low to that pond in the first place. How did he not see it? The landscape had been completely frozen over, and yet the pond had been unfrozen; a dark, deep well of water.

Jack shivered and withdrew his hand again, taking a shallow breath. He felt unwell.

‘What happened just now?’ Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

‘I think I’m just going to head off. You seem okay, right?’

‘Jack, I know I have not been particularly stable, of late. But you can still *talk* to me. You do understand that, don’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, easing off the bed and picking up his staff. ‘Yeah, I just...’

He felt jarred by what he’d realised. He needed an empty space to gather his thoughts together. He just needed...

Jack realised that he could choose sleep again. Even if it was only a few hours, it would give him darkness, and he wouldn’t have to *think* anymore.

\*

He felt the grit of sand and lake rocks under his knees. He could see blood-stained, sodden clothing in his peripheral vision. Around him, the strange, eerie greenish light of a giant, underwater dome.

He was bleeding freely from his back and front, naked, and he was so, *so* tired. The air around him was humid, cloying. He breathed in water vapour, exhaled terror.

He knew this place.

He strained against binds that he couldn't see. He was told to stop fighting, to obey, to open his mouth, and did. Numbness was followed by a heavy, warm weight pushing past his teeth, across his tongue, and all of his senses had come alive at once. His mind wouldn't allow him the mercy of emptiness. He couldn't *fight*, he couldn't breathe and it didn't matter that he didn't need to, there was only one reason he couldn't breathe, and August looked down with that eternal smirk on his face and Jack couldn't *breathe*-

The images twisted and Jack knelt on the ground, August beside him as Jack was gathered close in his arms, offered a false comfort and unable to stop crying because how could this be *worse than before*? The ground shook, August mentioned he cavalry and Jack no longer believed in rescue. He was already so close to dying, it wouldn't be more than a short step into oblivion and he could-

Water everywhere. Teeth digging so deep into his skin that he shrieked when he felt one particularly long tooth grind against his rib. The bone on bone contact caused a flash of agony to rip all the way down to his toes. He was inhaling water. He was *drowning*. He didn't have his staff. He was no frost spirit. He was going to-

Jack woke violently rasping for breath, his lungs and throat a sear of pain. He knelt over the side of his bed, retching repeatedly, bringing up pink-tinged frost, trying to expel water, *August*. His chest heaved on unvoiced sobs.

August's voice echoed: *I have intended you as a gift*. Jack shook his head rapidly, trying to push words and sentences from his mind and failing. Even when the dry retching had subsided and he was able to ride out the waves of nausea, even when the sobbing had abated to hitched, shallow breathing, he shuddered with terror. His hands clawed into sheets, freezing the fabric.

When Mora approached him, he cried out, seeing only the large, dark shape of a horse with glowing eyes. A horse that had opened its huge maw of a mouth and sliced teeth right into him.

He then realised he was on his bed. The Each Uisge didn't have a yellow blaze on his forehead as a waterhorse. He blinked rapidly and Mora came into view. He moaned with relief. It was just a dream. Just a bad dream. He wrapped a hand around his ribs and swung his legs over the mattress, catching his breath.

Mora didn't approach again and Jack was glad of it, he didn't think he could handle another increase in his fear. He looked over at her, wished he could blame her for the nightmare, but he didn't think he could. Mora had never wanted to give him truly awful nightmares. Ever since they had first met, she had tried to give him nightmares that balanced on a sweet edge. She would show him his sister on the frozen lake. She would show him Jamie before he had died. Mora had only once truly gorged on his fears in a mindless manner, but she had never done it again.

He spent some time staring numbly at the crack of light under his bedroom door, listening to the growing sounds of yeti and elves bustling about in preparation for a new day. Then he took his staff from where it was leaning against the wall, briefly pressed the palm of his to Mora's muzzle, breath stuttering at the rise of fear she caused.

He slipped out the window and flew shakily, clumsily up to the tower where Sandy kept his permanent golden cloud.

Sandy wasn't there, the cloud was empty. Jack couldn't tell if he was grateful or not.

He sat down on the cloud with his back to one of the fluffier puffs of cumulus, and then he leaned against it awkwardly, keeping one of his arms wrapped around his ribs even as he put his staff down. His breath was still uneven, he kept looking around. Real life felt like an illusion. If he didn't keep checking, he would somehow end up back in August's clutches. After all, hadn't he wished so hard to be back at North's Workshop while he'd been there? What if this was just a trick, and he'd wished himself into a fantasy?

His eyes skated around his surroundings over and over again, until a fractious, restless exhaustion moved over him. He began to tap his foot on the cloud, and finally made himself lie down, knees up to his chest, and staring at the growing light of day.

Sandy returned on a giant manta ray a short while later. He waved enthusiastically when he saw Jack, and his face split into a huge grin. But as he landed onto his main cloud, he saw something that turned his expression into one of worry. Jack began to sit up, but Sandy waved his hands, flashing a stop-sign above his head.

Jack stopped moving, watched as Sandy walked over and sat down beside him.

'Do you need to me to leave? So you can get some sleep?'

Sandy gave a deep half-smile, amused. His expression seemed to say: *I don't think so.*

Sandy got up and walked around so that he was sitting by Jack's head. He blew out a huff of tired sand, and then yawned and stretched hugely.

'Tired, huh?' Jack said. 'As tired as before? Or are you starting to get back to normal now?'

Sandy nodded, mimicked opening his eyes very wide with his fingers. So he was getting back to normal then.

'Thanks for Mora. I know I've said it, but...she's great, isn't she?'

Sandy smiled in agreement, and looked down at Jack. A moment later he pointed at Jack and nodded emphatically. He made a picture of a snowflake above his head, and then another of a love-heart. Jack laughed under his breath, tiredly.

'Well, I think you're pretty great too, Sandy,' he said. He reached up and rubbed absently at the scar at his throat, and winced when the movement pulled at the still-healing wounds on his back. He just wanted to not *feel* them anymore.

He watched the way sand shifted around them, never static, somehow supporting his weight and Sandy's. He still felt fragile after his nightmare and brought his knees back up to his chest. He wanted to make himself small enough that he could disappear. Phantom sensations still hung around him. He could taste lake water in his mouth, feel it swirling through his lungs. He felt August pushing over his tongue, unwanted and impossible to resist, compulsions making his mind belong to someone else.

He made a small, choked sound, squeezed his eyes shut.

He flinched when a small, warm hand rested on his forehead. He looked up at Sandy, who frowned. Sandy flashed a small question mark over his head, but Jack couldn't answer. After a while, Sandy sighed.

The small hand resting still on his forehead became fingers carding through his hair. And even though it was different, it was so *different* to August's hands moving through his hair, Jack's eyes flew open. He heard August saying, '*So, like this, then?*' And it didn't matter how many times he whispered 'stop,' there was no stopping what was happening. August was taking something that belonged to him and Pitch, and he knew exactly what he was doing, he was *amused* by it.

Jack gasped and pushed himself away from Sandy, scrubbing his own hand through his hair to rub away the ghost of August's fingers.

Sandy stood, alarmed, an exclamation mark flashing over his head. It became an interrobang, but Jack couldn't answer. He shook his head, his staff back in his hand. A bristling, prickly anger moved through him. He couldn't *believe* he was still reacting like this, and with Sandy! Sandy would *never* hurt him, he *knew* that.

'Sandy, I'm sorry. Really, hey, I'm sorry. It wasn't you. I promise. I know you're trying to help. I don't know what's wrong with me, I'm just-'

Jack dissolved into nervous laughter, and then hopped off the cloud. His last image of Sandy was of the worried spirit flashing an endless array of question marks over his head, while holding his hands up and indicating that Jack shouldn't leave.

\*

He paced the training arena, agitated. He didn't want to think anymore. He couldn't talk to anyone about his thoughts, and he didn't know where to start anyway. He realised he didn't *want* to talk to anyone about what had happened. He had flashes of wanting the comfort Pitch could offer, but the desire was quelled by knowing it came with the price of having to *talk* about it.

He didn't want that. Pitch would realise that Jack was over-reacting, he would see that Jack had brought it on himself by not fearing August as much as he should have from the beginning.

Jack made a sound of frustration and unleashed a violent burst of frost lightning. It crackled blue and pale around him, dissolving into frost particles.

*I'm already here...* Jack thought, as he watched the frost particles fall to the ground. *Didn't Gwyn want me to test what I could do with my powers?*

Maybe that would take his mind off things.

He put the staff down, wanting to know what he could do without it. He called snow to his hands, everything responding far faster than it used to. He only needed to think of it, and it was there, waiting for him. He placed his hands on the ground and watched a thick, hard sheet of ice coat the snow around him. Then he ran over the ice, turned it into snow again.

It didn't fill him with the same carefree joy that it used to. It was serious now, the ice and the frost. And in response to his need, he felt ice crystals grow all the way down his arm, pushing up out of his skin. It didn't hurt, it didn't feel unnatural, but it looked strange. It gave his flesh a bluish hue, made him feel less human than he'd ever felt. Gwyn had always said that Jack was close to being truly fae, even Pitch had said it; but it was the first time he'd ever felt it was true.

But Jack didn't love the fae world. He may have met some people in it who weren't terrible – Ondine, Albion, Makara, even Gwyn, sometimes. But the fae world had brought him and Pitch nothing but pain, it had dragged them into a war that he didn't want to be a part of.

Anger pushed through him in a dark, thick wave, and he felt it push out through his arms. His

fingertips grew jagged, long icicles. He looked down in confusion, flexing his fingers, looking at the blue and white discolouration of his hands. The icicles themselves adhered to his body, obeyed his will. As soon as he shook his hands to dislodge them, they fell off. He brushed the ice crystals off his arm, but they reformed.

*That's...new.*

Jack took a deep, shaking breath. He was doing all of this without his *staff*. The more he worked with the ice, the icicles, the frost, the more power he felt inside of him.

He flew over to his staff and picked it up. He twirled it in his hand and frost responded. He flew up and around the training arena, sending the mostly silent, crackling energy of the frost lightning down into the snow. The more he worked, the less aware of limitations he became.

He was frustrated at how often he felt both of August's bite marks – still turning into scars – pulling and straining at his back as he swung the staff. He grit his teeth, tried to ignore the sensation of it, focused on the ice, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. His skin crawled. He couldn't stop remembering August, kneeling behind him, and then the sound of *chewing*, and he choked out a sound of denial. This was *not* happening, this was supposed to be a *distraction*.

He landed. He took a deep, hoarse breath.

He unleashed his frost.

Frost-lightning tore from his staff in ragged, splintered bursts so huge that Jack soon couldn't see anything else around him except blue, pale shards. He clenched his staff with two hands, a shaking grip, closed his eyes and abandoned himself to it, finally feeling nothing but the winds of Antarctica and the Arctic inside of himself. He felt as though he were the storm-force katabatic winds, scouring away the snow of the Antarctic slopes and ice sheets and leaving nothing but dry frost and ice. He stared at the frost lightning, blistering away his environment. It was oddly beautiful, absolutely hypnotic.

He didn't want to stop.

Minutes later, a heavy force slammed into his side. Jack fell sideways, turning with his staff, frost lightning still spilling from it. His eyes widened when he saw Pitch, and he only narrowly managed to miss hitting him directly with a blast of the bluish lightning. He swung his staff away, and the frost lightning abruptly stopped. Jack became aware of how cold it was, how much the temperature had dropped.

'Look!' Pitch gasped, pointing.

Jack followed the direction of his finger, and his eyes widened. North's Workshop – the parts of it that bordered the training arena – was completely encased in jagged, sharp sheets of ice, all the way up to the roof and then twisting beyond. Jack could hardly make out the original walls. He staggered to his feet. When he realised he could hear his own breathing, he tried to force it back under his control. What was it that Gwyn had said? *Then perhaps you should feel grateful that you decided to let loose here, instead of in North's Workshop.*

'Jack, this isn't...normal,' Pitch said. Jack stared at him. Why was he even here? Did everyone know what he'd done?

'I had it under control,' Jack said, knowing that there was no way Pitch would believe him. He didn't even believe himself. All that frost lightning, all of that ice, he hadn't even begun to deplete

his powers. What had the golden light done to him? 'It'll *melt*.'

'You most certainly did *not* have that under control,' Pitch said, looking more like himself than he had since he'd been rescued. 'Come with me.'

'No,' Jack said, stepping back when Pitch reached out like he wanted to put a hand on Jack's shoulder. 'Leave me alone.'

'Come with me, Jack. Please,' Pitch added, brow furrowing.

With that, he walked away, picking his way carefully over broken bits of ice. Jack followed after a few seconds. He didn't know what else to do. He couldn't stop staring at the ice plastering the side of the Workshop. He hoped he hadn't interfered with the work of the yeti and elves and North too much. It was probably pretty cold in there right now.

Pitch took him to the outer edges of the ward's boundary. There, he sat down in the middle of a snowfield. Jack followed suit, remembering that they had done this a few times in the beginning, back when he wasn't sure where he stood with Pitch.

They sat in silence. Pitch seemed to be searching for something to say, and Jack was still reeling at how easily he'd produced that much ice, and how much he'd wanted to keep going. How long could he produce the stuff until his powers were low? That frost lightning, in the beginning, even small bursts of it had tired him out. Now...

'What would you have done if I hadn't shown up?' Pitch said, and Jack swallowed.

'Why did you show up? Are you stalking me?'

Pitch stared at Jack as though he'd said something very strange, and then shook his head.

'Sandy came to me, he said that you were behaving oddly. I went looking for you.'

'Oh.' Jack folded his legs, rested his elbow on his knee, rested his chin in the palm of his hand.

'Yes. I'm rather glad I went seeking you out, actually. Getting an early start on turning the planet into Snowball Earth?'

'Very funny,' Jack said, dryly.

'It isn't,' Pitch said, looking at Jack seriously. 'You're not even tired, are you?'

Jack shook his head, sighed.

'I wanted to talk to you about something else,' Pitch said, and Jack could tell by the way he'd softened his voice, that Jack wasn't going to like it. The softer Pitch got, the pushier he was about to get.

'I think I preferred when you weren't speaking to me,' Jack muttered, and Pitch chuckled behind a closed mouth. But the chuckling tapered off and Pitch looked serious again. Serious and tired, cigar ash smudges beneath his eyes.

'North says you've not been alright since I was taken by the shadows.'

Jack exhaled an abrupt shock of laughter.

'Oh, no, we're not having this conversation. Of course I wasn't *alright*.'

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, carefully, ‘I had assumed that you were in a position where you would talk to people about it. Where- Hadn’t we gotten to a place where you were starting to talk to people? You’d confided in North more. You were opening up to me. But North said that you dealt with me going...the way I believe you dealt with Jamie’s death.’

Jack stared at Pitch, skin prickling, uncomfortable. There was nothing *wrong* with the way he’d dealt with it, because Pitch hadn’t been *dead*, he’d just been taken. And it was temporary. And they’d rescued him.

‘You can’t say you love me,’ Pitch said, ‘and then pretend it didn’t matter that I was taken from you.’

Jack stood up quickly, and Pitch did the same, facing Jack with an expression that made Jack want to claw at his face. He didn’t *want* this.

‘I’m not talking to you about this!’ Jack said, aware that his voice was rising, a sharp counterpoint to Pitch’s quiet words.

‘If not me, then who?’ Pitch said, and Jack grit his teeth.

‘I don’t need to talk to anyone about it, because you’re *back*. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we defeated the Nightmare King. The shadows that held you are *gone*. There might be some more left over, but we still have the weapons, and the golden light, and we’ll get rid of the rest. What is there to talk about?’

‘You’re being deliberately obtuse,’ Pitch said, eyes narrowing. ‘Is this what’s been working for you, since the gymnasium? Denial?’

‘Screw you, Pitch,’ Jack snarled, ‘I don’t have to listen to this.’

He turned to leave, but jerked backwards when a hand grabbed the hood of his sweatshirt. He whirled, staff up. Pitch had already let go, eyebrows raised.

‘It’s alright to talk about *me*, isn’t it, Jack? Alright to ask about the nightmares I’m having? But as soon as the tables are turned, look at you *run*. I do believe you are worse than when you first visited me with Mora.’

Jack’s breathing came faster. He hopped onto the winds. He should just leave, he should just-

‘Jack, I spent years tormenting children, adults, anyone who had-’

‘The *Nightmare King* did those things,’ Jack said, and Pitch grimaced.

‘Fine. I spent years *alongside* the Nightmare King while he did those *things*, as you so eloquently put it. Do you think that I don’t have intimate, firsthand knowledge of how fears catch up with someone? Of how amusing and dangerous the cycle of denial and repression can be?’

‘So you’re amused?’ Jack said, and Pitch shot Jack a black look.

‘Out of everything I’m saying to you, *that’s* what you’re hearing?’

Jack swallowed and said nothing, but the wind picked up under his feet. Pitch felt it and ran a hand through his hair. Jack could see he was frustrated. He wanted to apologise, but he didn’t know how.



'I'm just frustrated I can't leave the Workshop. That's all,' Jack said, and Pitch looked incredulous.

'Will you stop *lying* to me?' he said, voice strained. 'I know you feel trapped here, but this is not just frustration that you can't leave. I may not be able to read your fears as clearly as I once could, but you are unskilled at lying.'

*Not so unskilled*, Jack thought mutinously. *There's a lot of things you don't know about me these days, Pitch.*

'Go then,' Pitch said, eyes narrowing. 'Leave. Maintain your denials. We will see how long this works for you. But when they fail-'

'What? Don't come running to you?' Jack mocked, and Pitch shook his head.

'I was going to say, when they fail, just know that I will be here. Stuck in this blasted Workshop with you. Do you understand?'

Jack blinked, nodded curtly, didn't know what else to say.

He left.

\*

In the end, his desire to make sure that Pitch wasn't alone during his nightmares won out over Jack's unwillingness to be drawn back into another minefield conversation. He crept along the outside of the Workshop, tried to ignore his guilt when he saw sprays of ice clinging to the walls that hadn't yet melted. The entire day had been spent carefully avoiding North and the yeti. One of the yeti had stumbled across him and just given him a *look*. An 'I know what you did,' look. It had taken so long to get them on his side as well.

He was surprised to see a glow of light from Pitch's room as he approached. And when he entered, Pitch's bed was still made. He looked to the side to see Pitch in an old armchair, writing by candlelight.

It was so familiar, so reminiscent of better times, that Jack stopped and couldn't move. His heart twisted and he couldn't look away.

'Are you going to come in?' Pitch said, without looking up.

'Why are you suddenly doing so much better?' Jack said, and Pitch paused in his writing, and then resumed.

'Because nothing stays the same,' Pitch said, and Jack rolled his eyes and sighed.

'So helpful, thank you. I forgot how helpful you could be.'

'Did you?' Pitch said, answering his sarcasm with an infuriatingly innocent tone.

Jack walked into the room and then hung back again.

'I don't want to talk,' Jack said, pre-emptively.

'Then we do not have to talk, do we? Come sit by me, if you like.'

Jack swallowed. There were no other chairs in the room, no other places to sit by Pitch, except up on the armrest of the armchair. *Like before*, Jack realised.

He wanted that. Pitch made it sound so simple, as though – earlier – they hadn't been arguing. He approached quietly, looking into Pitch's notebook. He touched the armrest with his hand, wished that Pitch was in his old room in the Workshop, with the old armchair.

'Are you sure?' Jack said, and Pitch looked up at him, an unfathomable look in his eyes, the candlelight turning his face into harsh angles.

'Do I ever offer anything, if I'm unsure?' Pitch said, and Jack looked away from that direct gaze. Pitch went back to writing, and Jack slid onto the armrest, folding a knee underneath himself and hooking his staff onto the back of the chair. He wasn't properly touching Pitch, he'd left about an inch or two between them, but this close he could still feel Pitch's warmth.

*This is also like before.*

Pitch kept writing the lunar alphabet. He couldn't recognise words, but most of the letters themselves were familiar now. Listening to the scratch of the fountain pen against the page was soothing, and Jack felt more relaxed.

A minute after that, Pitch shifted casually in the chair, and Jack tensed when he felt Pitch's robe up against his sweatshirt. But nothing happened after that, except a slight rise in the body heat against him, and he relaxed minutes later, watching Pitch write. He looked down at Pitch's robe against him, and was surprised to see darkness actively receding on part of Pitch's collar. It was fascinating to watch. One moment the robe looked as though it had always been black, the next, Jack saw silver, ornate embroidery appear.

He wondered what had done it; the writing? Or Jack's proximity?

'What are you writing? Is it a journal?' Jack said, when he realised that no more of the embroidery was going to be revealed.

'Not quite,' Pitch said, as he continued writing. 'I try and remember old lessons. Parables. Meditations. Those things from the past that are grounding, for all that they are painful.'

Jack slouched further on the armrest and looked over Pitch's shoulder.

'Grounding?' Jack said, 'Is that just a fancy way of saying that it helps you not feel as violent towards things?'

'Yes,' Pitch said quietly. 'It is.'

'Is that why you did it before? Even then?'

'In part, yes,' Pitch said, turning to look at Jack. Jack became acutely aware of the scarf around his torso and he looked away. Pitch went back to his writing, and Jack touched his sweatshirt surreptitiously, checking if the scarf was still there. He couldn't help it.

'What's it like?' Jack said. 'Having...the darkness left over like that?'

Pitch took a deep breath.

'It is like coming back to your mind, to find new roads laid down, new signposts. You see them and believe they look interesting, or tempting, and wander down, only to find yourself in a dark land. Dark thoughts. I'm not sure what it's like for anyone else. The lunar alphabet helps me remember pathways that existed long before the living shadows took me over. But they are dusty and unused, so it must be a conscious effort to strengthen them.'

Jack shifted tentatively closer to Pitch. He turned his body towards him, then did it again when Pitch didn't move away. He felt the warmth of Pitch through his robe, felt his own skin warming in response. Jack's cold temperature succumbed to that relentless heat. It was like an unexpected shaft of sunlight on a cold day.

Jack thought back to their conversation the night before, and he frowned.

'You keep telling me I'm not afraid enough of August. Did he...uh, I don't think there's a tactful way of putting this, but...the relationship the Nightmare King had with him. Did August hurt the Nightmare King?'

Pitch stopped writing entirely, he laid his pen down. Then his shoulders shook with silent laughter.

Jack moved away to get a better look at Pitch.

'What?' Jack said. 'What's so funny?'

Pitch's laughter became audible behind his closed mouth, and then he turned amused eyes on Jack.

'Is that what you think? What you assumed? That the Nightmare King let himself be taken for a ride by the Each Uisge?'

'Isn't it?' Jack said, blinking, and Pitch chuckled again, shaking his head.

'How could he hurt the Nightmare King?' Pitch said.

'But his centre is domination, isn't it? And he and the Nightmare King used to have...a thing? I just assumed that-'

'Ah, I suppose that is a logical progression,' Pitch said, closing the journal and putting it down beside the armchair.

'It wasn't like that?' Jack said. He could never get a clear grasp on what a relationship between the Nightmare King and August would look like. For that matter, he couldn't get a clear grasp on what a relationship with the Nightmare King and *anyone* would look like. After all, the Nightmare King wasn't a coherent whole, but a collective of living shadows. They might have some common goals, but they did not have a common, consistent personality.

'To the best of my knowledge, the Nightmare King is the only creature to have ever dominated the Each Uisge. In the bedroom and out of it. The power balance in that relationship is *not* what you think.'

Jack didn't move, but privately he was reeling. His mind was making connections he didn't want to be making.

'I suspect,' Pitch continued, 'that the reason he wanted to possess *you* with the shadows, and not me, is precisely because-'

'Pitch, *all* of his attacks, just about, have been really personal,' Jack sat straighter. 'Does Gwyn know about this?'

'If August hasn't told anyone, then I don't expect so.'

Jack began to shake, and he hoped that Pitch would interpret it as excitement or nerves instead of fear.

'Pitch, he attacked you. He tried to possess me. He's had it in for me since...well, you know, for a really long time. You said yourself that he holds a grudge. I just- What did the Nightmare King do to him?'

'I don't particularly remember,' Pitch said, becoming serious. 'The first time, I was pushed too far down to know a great deal. This time...much the same. I don't remember a significant amount of my time as the Nightmare King. Every time I was *conscious*, I was trying to fight back, or...trying to escape knowing what I'd become.'

Jack was trying to wrap his head around it all.

'If you don't remember it properly, then how do you know you're right about this? Maybe you're...misremembering?' Jack said, and Pitch sighed.

'No. What I do remember, it's not pleasant- The Nightmare King didn't have *relationships*. He used people. There is nothing of mutuality in what I do remember. I'd prefer not to talk about it, in all honesty.'

Jack swallowed hard. That sounded bad. That sounded really bad.

'What was it you said about him?' Jack said. 'What did you say about him ages ago? Something like... 'He cannot be denied without-''

'-Without seeking vindication,' Pitch finished. 'Surely you're not implying that *all* of this is-'

'Gwyn said himself that he didn't understand why August was making it so personal,' Jack said in a rush. 'Oh god, didn't this all kick off in the first place when he ordered the Nain Rouge to take the Nightmare King's shadows? Wouldn't that- Isn't that some kind of vindication? Pitch, he took the shadows from the Nightmare King and then compelled you to make you stay in an underground prison until he...until he felt like releasing you. Which sounds like it was gonna be *never*. You weren't supposed to *ever* get out of there. How can you not see that this is personal?'

Pitch took several deep breaths, and then pressed his head into the back of the chair, staring out into nothingness, clearly thinking it over.

'I'm right, aren't I?' Jack said. He felt sick. He thought of how intent August had seemed on making Jack a 'gift' for the Nightmare King, or Pitch. How fervently he'd gone about breaking Jack down, following that up with a compulsion to tell either incarnation what had happened. Jack realised he really was just a pawn. The idea that he had been caught up in some sick, personal vendetta made him queasy.

'What about everything else?' Pitch said, 'Removing fae from their territories, causing the Blight? Hijacking the schools?'

'Well, I don't know the answer to *everything*,' Jack said, 'But I'm going to be telling Gwyn about this, because I don't think the Nightmare King can use a fae whose centre is domination, and then that not have any consequences, especially with how he's been. He came to *Kostroma*.'

Jack drew both of his legs closer to his body, tried to stop shaking. He didn't know what to think. He hadn't wanted to think about the relationship between the two of them when he'd first found out because it had seemed so absurd. Then he hadn't wanted to think about it, because it confused him. How did a relationship between the two of them even work? And now Pitch had implied that it hadn't even really been a relationship, but some kind of...toxic power exchange?

'You're practically buzzing,' Pitch said, as he reached over and picked up the journal again. 'Are

you planning on running away, once more?’

‘What?’ Jack said absently. ‘No, no. I don’t know how to get to Gwyn at this time of night anyway. He’s hard to contact.’

‘Yes, one of the many ways I think he deals with his unwanted Kingship,’ Pitch said, opening up to a new blank page, and uncapping his fountain pen.

Jack closed his eyes, tried to calm himself. He was scared. He was excited. This was significant. He couldn’t believe that Pitch hadn’t made the connection. But then, Pitch seemed to work hard to disconnect himself from anything to do with the Nightmare King, so perhaps he just pushed it too far away to make the connections on his own.

‘Do you want to learn?’ Pitch said, softly.

Jack opened his eyes and looked at Pitch, who had drawn a single letter on the page.

‘I...really?’

‘I thought, since your centre has changed, we might as well make the most of it.’

‘You’d want me to learn this?’ Jack said, surprised. He’d always thought of it as something private. Pitch had never attempted to explain any of the writing before. Not even the lunar alphabet on his robes or his sword.

‘I will take that as a ‘yes’ then, shall I?’

Jack leaned closer to Pitch without really thinking about it. It was only when they were halfway through the alphabet itself, that Jack realised two things: First, the lunar alphabet was complicated and that perhaps his centre changing didn’t make a difference when it came to formal learning. Second, Pitch was warm and smelled of cinnamon, woody spices and something essentially *Pitch*. He hadn’t realised how much he’d missed it. Eventually Pitch seemed to realise that Jack’s attention was wavering, and he slipped into silence, writing whole words and phrases as Jack’s concentration drifted while he was warm on one side, cool on the other.

He didn’t want to leave.

\*

‘I need a better way of staying in touch with you,’ Jack said, as Gwyn pulled off his helmet and lay it down on the table in the round-table room with a *thunk*. ‘The horn is for emergencies. And otherwise I can’t get in touch. I mean, it’s inconvenient, that’s all I’m saying.’

‘I come by every day,’ Gwyn said. ‘Now, tell me why it’s so inconvenient that I only just arrived.’

‘Were you in the middle of a battle?’

‘I *finished* a battle,’ Gwyn said, and Jack realised – eyes widening – that Gwyn was covered in splatters of black and red blood. His hair was damp with sweat, and there was a broad smear of dirt that had somehow made its way onto his face, despite the helmet.

‘Is everything alright?’

‘It is now,’ Gwyn said grimly, sitting down. ‘At least in terms of the battle. Now, tell me what you are thinking. I have something to discuss with you also.’

'It's just that trying to get around the Workshop at the moment while avoiding North is pretty difficult.'

'Do I even want to know?' Gwyn said, and Jack made a face.

'Uh, it's just that, you know how you told me it was a good thing that I didn't unleash my powers on the Workshop? I...kind of did that. Not really. I mean, I didn't damage anything, and it'll melt. The yeti don't like me again.'

Gwyn gave him a look that indicated that he was so far beyond caring, Jack actually shifted uncomfortably in his seat. There were times when Gwyn was capable of being good-natured, even if he was awkward. Clearly now was not one of those times.

'Right,' Jack said. 'Okay then. Look, you know that the Nightmare King and August had a thing right?'

Gwyn's eyes narrowed. He said nothing, and Jack decided to just continue.

'Well, maybe you knew. They were sort of weirdly affectionate at the gymnasium. But, you keep saying you're not sure why August is making it so personal right? Is it news to you that the Nightmare King dominated August? Ages ago? And kind of...used him?'

Gwyn's face went blank. Jack realised that Gwyn didn't know.

'You're mistaken,' Gwyn said, flatly.

'No, not mistaken. Pitch brought it up last night. He doesn't lie about these things, or really, *anything*. I just thought it might be relevant, because-'

'I don't understand,' Gwyn said. 'August would never allow it. It contravenes the centre he's had all his *life*.'

'Yeah, look, I don't think that mattered to the Nightmare King. Or maybe it did and he liked the challenge, I don't know. I think that's just the way it worked out. I think that's why August wanted to possess me with the shadows the second time, at the school, and not Pitch. I think Pitch getting possessed again was a mistake.'

Gwyn traced his index finger along the visor of his helmet, thoughtfully.

'Are you sure? Pitch never said anything to me about this.'

'I'm sure, and also, Pitch just didn't make the connection. He wouldn't have brought it up. I was...checking that August didn't hurt him, or you know, hurt the Nightmare King and leave Pitch with bad memories or something. And he just, he *laughed*, Gwyn. I'd assumed that August was calling the shots, but-'

'If you're right, this is valuable,' Gwyn said. 'Very. It's *not* common knowledge. A rumour of August – with his centre – being dominated or controlled by someone like the Nightmare King would have spread *incredibly* fast. The fact that no one knows- If this is true, if this is something the Each Uisge is ashamed of, is seeking retribution for...'

The gleam of light that entered Gwyn's eyes was frightening. Jack swallowed. He hoped that it was just a side effect of Gwyn coming straight off the battlefield.

'You look kind of excited about this. I thought you two were friends?'

‘I have fae dying in my Court. I have Unseelie fae dying *outside* of my Court. If we were friends, it is only in the past tense. Augus lost any traction with me when he started ousting fae from their homes. That is, for us, a *heinous* crime. I’m afraid the most he can expect from me is that I won’t kill him.’

‘Wait, you won’t?’ Jack said, shivering. ‘I thought you said he was hard to kill anyway.’

‘If I can manoeuvre him in a way that he will surrender his Kingship, I can demote him and remove the bulk of his powers. Then, yes, he can be killed.’

‘And you...won’t?’

Gwyn’s look was knowing. The smile he offered Jack was cold. Jack laughed nervously.

‘No wonder you won your battle,’ he said, ‘Do you just *look* at them like that?’

Gwyn’s face cleared, and he blinked several times.

‘I apologise,’ Gwyn said. ‘The bloodlust hasn’t yet calmed. I came straight here. It’s also bewildering in a sense to think that this might be such a motivating factor. And yet, knowing what I know of Augus- When did they first meet?’

‘Uh, ages ago, the first time. Like, *ages* ago. I got the impression that it was way before most of the Guardians were around.’

‘You seem easier on the subject of Augus. Did something happen?’

Jack shook his head. Then he laughed.

‘I’m easier on the subject of us *defeating* him. I, no, otherwise...’

Jack waved a hand to indicate that things were not easier. Gwyn stood up and walked over to the window, staring out of it.

‘I think you should tell Pitch. About what happened,’ Gwyn said quietly.

‘I can’t,’ Jack said immediately, feeling sick, ‘He’s fragile. And the Each Uisge wanted it to hurt him. He *wanted* that. I have to fight that compulsion every day. I’m *not* going to be the Each Uisge’s messenger. I’m not going to have my body be some *message*.’

Gwyn turned and leaned against the windowsill. He folded his arms and frowned at Jack. The cold, callous set of his face was gone, replaced with something introspective. It was an expression he’d seen many times while they’d climbed the mountain to visit the Glasera. Jack wondered if Gwyn knew that his face didn’t always convey what he was thinking. If that was something he did on purpose.

‘This isn’t about you being a message,’ Gwyn said, ‘It’s about sharing yourself with someone you put yourself on the line for. Don’t you believe that you and Pitch are strong enough to handle that?’

Jack bit his lip and looked down at the table.

‘I made a mistake,’ Gwyn said. ‘I had assumed that Augus saw something about your relationship that I didn’t, as relationships are not my forte, and Augus is often exceptional at interpreting interpersonal links. But now I think he saw a fracture line between yourself and Pitch that simply wasn’t there.’

‘What if I tell him and it...accesses something really dangerous in Pitch?’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded thoughtfully.

‘And what if you tell him and it does the opposite?’

‘I don’t want to tell him,’ Jack said on a rush of air, and then his eyes widened.

*Oh.*

‘What if *this* was August’s preferred outcome?’ Gwyn said, gesturing at Jack. ‘You’re unstable. Not only are you unstable, but now you are unstable and possess an incredible amount of power. That you unleashed it around the Workshop, without thinking about the consequences it may have for others, indicates to me just how unstable you are.’

Jack blinked. His mind had preserved almost everything August had said to him, under that pool of water. He shuddered.

*‘When you break someone, during a war, they become a liability. Did you know this? They become a liability to the people who care about them. First, a broken person no longer thinks the way they once did, often permanently, certainly for a time. Second, a broken person takes up the energy of those around them, even when they do not mean, or even want to.’*

‘I don’t want to be a liability,’ Jack said, quietly. Gwyn raised his eyebrows.

‘It’s too late for that. You were a liability before. You’re a liability now.’

‘How can you say that? I helped come up with the weapons, I-’

‘It doesn’t cancel out the fact that you require more energy from us than a stable member of the team. You just happen to also be a crucial member of the team.’

‘You think I’ll become more stable if I tell him?’ Jack said, laughing, the sound brittle. ‘Because I think you’ll just-’

‘You’re both *already* unstable,’ Gwyn said, impatiently. ‘Who else do you think I have to visit every day? Albion? Ondine? But you and Pitch were at your strongest, your *most* stable, when you were being honest with one another. As I said, I made a mistake. I can’t believe I am saying this, but I may have overestimated August’s political nous.’

‘Yeah, well, maybe he just doesn’t look at *everyone* as some kind of tool in a toolbox to be manipulated however he sees fit. Maybe he just does that to his enemies, and not his allies as well.’

Jack didn’t believe a word of what he was saying. August was a manipulative, evil, cruel creature, and Jack knew it. But he was angry at Gwyn, and he couldn’t help but prod.

‘I know you don’t appreciate that about me,’ Gwyn said, stiffly, ‘but if you can see *another* way I can save my Kingdom, I would like to hear it.’

Silence stretched out between them, and Gwyn’s lips thinned.

‘No?’ he said. ‘I am *shocked*. I cannot believe you can’t think of a *nice* way of saving the Unseelie and Seelie Kingdoms.’

Jack knew then, how exhausted Gwyn was. He’d snapped like this, edged into a caustic sarcasm, towards the end of their climb up the mountain. For all that he talked about appreciating hiking, the



climb had taken it out of him as well. It made Jack want to fight back, to argue, but he knew it wouldn't get either of them anywhere. He hunched in his chair and sighed.

'You're not a very nice King,' Jack said, and Gwyn opened his mouth to disagree, and then shook his head.

'I'm the one who the fae thought could defeat the living shadows and restore order to the system. Desperate times do not call for *nice* Kings. Look, I know you don't want to hear that you are a liability, but you *are*. And that is true whether you tell him or not. I think you should tell him.'

'Yeah that's not gonna happen,' Jack said, frowning. 'I fail to see how-'

'That's the *point*,' Gwyn said. '*This* is the point. You don't fail to see how it would help, you are afraid.'

'What do you think will happen if I tell him? That he'll just take it calmly? When Sandy dissolved Mora, he *lost* it. I overheard North talking to him about it. He just- If he still cares for me as much as he did back then, you think he's unstable now? How do you think he's gonna be once he knows? You think you can keep an eye on him twenty four seven? Because I can't. He teleports through *shadows*. He can be gone in the blink of an eye. He knows where the Unseelie Court is. How do you know August just isn't waiting for him to come back bent on some kind of revenge fantasy? The Each Uisge still has living shadows left over, you said as much yourself. And Pitch doesn't think he'll survive being possessed again. I trust his judgement, and look, even if I didn't, he's *not* like he was before. I don't know if he'll survive being possessed again!'

'I didn't say it would be easy,' Gwyn said, 'only that I think that this road that you're currently on is not the wisest course.'

'It's not up to you,' Jack said. 'If you tell him, I will make you re-'

'*Don't*,' Gwyn said, stepping away from the wall, face darkening. 'Don't you *dare* threaten me. I give you a lot of rope, Jack Frost. Don't hang yourself with it.'

Jack realised his breathing was shallow, he was close to panicking. Jack didn't want to talk to Pitch about it, no matter if Gwyn said it was the better idea. Now that he had practice in hiding the encounter, he didn't want anyone else to find out about it. He didn't want Pitch reading all of his fears about it, before he even knew what they all were.

'Actually I came here to ask for your time,' Gwyn said, changing the subject. 'I have organised a meeting with Ash – August's brother – and Gulvi. I would like for you and Pitch to be there. It is time we formally showed the Unseelie Court that the Nightmare King has been soundly defeated, and I think having Pitch present will make sure this gets back to August. Gulvi- As I said, I do not think Ash will listen to us without her there. As for you, I find that you have proven yourself insightful, and I would like to know what you make of them during the meeting.'

'August's brother?' Jack said, nervous. 'But...'

'It is to be a private meeting. I shall be using the last ward to make sure no one else enters the space I create for this.'

'Are you- You're going to try and manipulate his brother aren't you? This is how you're starting. But what's to stop Ash from just going back to August and being like, 'Hey, the King of the Seelie fae is trying to manipulate me into betraying you?''

Gwyn smiled.

‘Never underestimate the power of love, Jack. It accomplishes truly great things.’

Jack laughed, horrified. He couldn’t help himself. In any other context it would be inspirational, it would be on Valentine’s Day greeting cards and people would be saying it to motivate each other on television and in the movies. But out of Gwyn’s mouth, it sounded like a sinister promise.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Reckless, Willing and Able,' a meeting is held with Ash, Gulvi, Pitch, Jack and Gwyn, and it doesn't go well. Jack really has very little control over his new powers. Also, Pitch finds out about what happened with Augus.

Basically all the things!

# Reckless, Willing and Able

## Chapter Notes

THANK YOU for all of your kudos, subscribes, bookmarks and comments. You guys are FANTASTIC. :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack tossed the snowball he'd made back and forth between his hands. He had nothing but air to blow over the top of it, none of that innate, cheerful magic he'd had before. It started to gain density as he tossed it, losing the air that puffed it up and kept it in safe snowball range.

Jack worried about the meeting that Gwyn had lined up with Ash and Gulvi. Presenting Pitch to a member of the Unseelie Court didn't seem like a good idea, even if Gwyn and Jack were going to be there. Pitch seemed more stable, but he doubted he was *actually* stable. Gulvi was absolutely untrustworthy, no matter what Gwyn said. And not only that, but Ash was August's *brother*. If Ash was even a small percentage like August, then Jack didn't know what he'd do. Did they look the same? Did they have the same mannerisms?

The snowball transformed into a solid ball of ice. As Jack bounced it back and forth between his hands, speculatively, the temperature dropped around him. His skin began to change from its regular hue to something bluish and bruised. Ice crystals formed along the back of his hands.

North had found Jack in his bedroom the previous morning. He'd simply thrown open Jack's door and announced:

'You are being back on the Naughty List! No more ice in the training arena, Jack! We are preparing field for you.'

Then he closed the door again and continued on his way, and that was the sum total of his judgement on what Jack had done. The ice from Jack's outburst in the training arena was *still* melting, and several yeti were on shifts to speed up the melting process with open flames from burning torches. So Jack was definitely not in their good books either.

That was how Jack ended up in the field later that day, close to the edge of the ward's boundary. One of the Workshop's smaller wooden buildings was behind him, but ahead, there was only cliff-face and mountain and more white, snowy ground.

It disturbed him, how willing Gwyn was to use personal relationships to manipulate others. He'd come to think of the Wild Hunt that he'd been invited to as some sort of extension of friendship, or camaraderie, but now he wasn't so sure. He thought he'd seen glimpses of friendship between the two of them, and he was almost certain that Gwyn cared for Pitch. But which side of Gwyn was the real side? Jack hadn't seen much awkwardness in Gwyn the last time they'd met; only a dark, feral need to put a situation to rights.

And yet, he was relieved too. He was out of his depth when dealing with someone as conniving as August. Gwyn seemed confident in what he was doing, especially with the Nightmare King defeated. Still, if Gwyn wasn't going to kill August, what would happen? He didn't like the idea of sharing a world with August. He couldn't imagine a prison that would contain him, and didn't like

to think what would happen if Augus ever got free.

It felt like – especially since that brief encounter at his ruined shack – they had unfinished business, as though Augus was just biding his time before he could complete what he had started underwater in the lake. Now that he knew he was somehow caught in Augus' vendetta against the Nightmare King, he could see he was a pawn, a stepping stone to affect someone else. Jack didn't like being anyone's unfinished business. Having the Nain Rouge promise to find him in the future for his powers, after already having stolen them once before, was bad enough.

Jack clenched his hand around the ball of ice in frustration. He spun and hurled it with all his might at the wooden wall behind him.

He was surprised to see Pitch there, leaning against a wall, watching him. He forgot about the ball of ice for the three seconds before it hit the wall with a *thud!* It shattered into sharp, glittery pieces.

Jack walked over. Pitch looked at the pieces of ice with his brows raised. Jack felt a flash of irritation. Why was Pitch following him around so much, now? Ever since Jack had told him that he was dying, Pitch seemed to be everywhere. But it wasn't like Jack was dying *now*.

'Your snowballs need work,' Pitch said, dryly.

'Ha, yeah, thanks,' Jack said, 'Gwyn come and talk to you yesterday? About meeting Ash and Gulvi?'

Pitch folded his arms.

'He did.'

'You think you're up for that?'

'As far as I understand it, I don't have to do much. Just be present and not a concerted mass of evil. I think I can manage *that*.'

'You're not worried? Ash has some of the living shadows.'

'You haven't met Ash,' Pitch said, a small smile edging the corners of his mouth. 'I'm not particularly worried. I'm more surprised that Gwyn thinks this could work, but his tactics are different to mine in these matters. Do you think you're up for it? The meeting? You and Gulvi have never gotten along.'

'Yeah, that's because I've *met* her,' Jack said, rolling his eyes. 'Of course I'm up for it.'

But Jack wasn't so sure. He couldn't look at Pitch without thinking about what Gwyn had said about telling him about what had happened with Augus. Jack knew, logically, it was a lose-lose situation. Not telling Pitch had consequences. Telling Pitch had consequences. Jack didn't want to see the look on his face when he realised how much Jack had been lying. He'd seemed so upset about Jack lying in general. Jack hadn't realised that it would bother him so much.

And as far as lies went...

Jack sighed and shrugged.

'I have to be up for it, Gwyn wants me there. And-'

'You *have* to be up for it? I remember when you used to avoid meetings,' Pitch said, tilting his

head. 'You used to-'

A rush of anger spiked through Jack and he glared.

'I'm not *him* anymore, Pitch. If this is going to be some kind of walk down memory lane, I just...I'm not interested. Okay? Really not.'

Pitch's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed at Jack's outburst. Jack looked away. He couldn't escape the fact that Pitch obviously missed the Jack whose centre had been fun. It was a heavy weight in his gut, because Jack wanted for Pitch to look at him the way he used to, but now...

'It was only an observation,' Pitch said, and Jack ground his teeth together.

'No, it wasn't. I get it. Everyone misses the old Jack Frost, with his sense of fun and whatever.'

*Old Jack Frost didn't bring you back, Pitch.*

But even as he thought it, he understood. He didn't much like himself either, these days.

'Jack, I'm sorry,' Pitch said, face softening. 'I didn't think-'

'I'll see you later, for the meeting,' Jack said coldly. With that, he turned away and walked resolutely back to his staff, deciding he would test his powers again. He didn't look back to see if Pitch was there, and when he did much later – through a floating mist of snow and ice – Pitch was gone.

\*

That evening, under the cover of darkness, they were transported to a clearing in a forest that Jack had never visited before.

Gwyn had set up the boundaries of what he called the meeting space. It was nothing more than a large tent that – from the outside – rippled and reflected its forest environment. Outside of that, a small campfire. Jack was surprised to see that Gwyn wasn't in his battle armour, but had chosen less formal clothing. He checked and double-checked the small boundaries, pacing along them and moving his fingers along what must have been the energy keeping them safe, checking for gaps or weaknesses.

Gwyn watched the outer edges of the forest keenly. Sometimes he stopped all movement, stood attentive, leaning towards something he'd heard or sensed amongst the thick fir trees around them. Every time he did that, Jack tensed automatically, staff out, worried that August would come. Worried that Ash would simply tell the entire Unseelie Court that this was happening. Then Gwyn would relax after seconds, or a minute, or two minutes, and check the boundaries again. He was focused and sombre, and – Jack realised – in his element. There was nothing awkward about him now. Every time Jack saw Gwyn in a forest, something false peeled back and exposed the wild animal beneath.

Gwyn had assured them that even if August or the rest of his Unseelie Court arrived – which he stressed wasn't likely – the boundaries around the meeting space would only permit Ash and Gulvi. It was keyed to their energy signature.

It must have been a difficult magic to work, because it had taken Gwyn a long time to keep adding layers to the spell. After a while Pitch had walked up to him and Jack distinctly saw him mouth the words, 'Are you okay?' Gwyn nodded dismissively, and Pitch walked away again.

Jack kept his distance from Pitch. He was nervous. There were too many things about this meeting that could go wrong. He didn't know what August had told the other members of the Unseelie Court about their encounter. He didn't like the fact that Pitch was so vulnerable to being possessed by the shadows again, especially while he couldn't make the light. Pitch didn't think he'd survive possession again. Jack couldn't look at him without seeing him fall to the shadows in the gymnasium, couldn't look without seeing the way Pitch had turned to look at him right at the end, when he'd mouthed the words, 'Save me.'

They'd found a few easier moments, but how could it ever be the same? Jack couldn't *tell* him, no matter what Gwyn said. Standing close to him hurt.

Gwyn tensed at the hooting of an owl, but after watching it pass – a dark shadow overhead – his shoulders lowered once more. He picked up his recurve bow where he'd leaned it against the tent, a quiver of arrows hung at his back. Jack noticed the three arrows tipped with the metal from Pitch's sword were there.

In the tent, Gwyn had one of the weapons that North had made, already set up.

*Gotta hand it to the guy, he's prepared.*

Jack walked up to Gwyn and felt a strange ripple of energy close to where Gwyn was standing. He put his hands up and it was like being close to an open power circuit. He could feel magic crackling along his palm.

'The boundaries?' Jack said, eyebrows rising. Gwyn nodded.

'I want to be very sure that even if the Each Uisge shows up, he cannot overhear us. This is more sophisticated than the ward on its own. We cannot be heard or seen properly within these boundaries, to someone who has not been invited within. And we ourselves will not move past these boundaries. We will teleport directly in and out.'

'I'm worried about Pitch,' Jack whispered. 'You have to make sure that if anything happens, if anything goes down, you keep an eye on him and get ready to use that weapon. He doesn't have his light.'

Gwyn looked over at Pitch, who was pacing the opposite edge of the impromptu camp. The axe was strapped to his back, he cut an imposing figure. Jack could see stress in every line of his body.

'Pitch!' Gwyn called sharply. 'Go and wait inside the tent.'

Pitch turned and looked up at the stars, like he was summoning patience. Then he walked inside the tent without another word. Gwyn waited until the flaps of the tent had settled, before turning back to Jack.

'If you're asking me if I'm worried, I am,' Gwyn said. 'I didn't like your idea of destroying Pitch's sword. You're just going to have to accept that there are things about this that you won't like.'

'How much does Ash look like August?' Jack whispered, and Gwyn's eyes widened.

'Enough,' he said, quietly. 'Is this what you're concerned about?'

'I just...keep having these things. Um, you know, just...random flashes of things. Like, not all the time. And it's not always predictable, but-'

'You should have *told* me!' Gwyn hissed.

‘Oh!’ Jack whispered, looking around at the forest around them, ‘I’m sorry! You were really creepy the last time I saw you. I wasn’t gonna tell you this!’

Gwyn shook his head as though he couldn’t believe this was happening, and Jack repressed his own flash of annoyance.

Everyone was stressed, this meeting was going to go *great*.

‘Ash looks somewhat like him. The hair and eyes are quite different, but the connection is there. You will pull yourself together for this meeting, Jack. I don’t have the inclination to-’

‘-They’re here,’ Jack said, movement catching in his peripheral vision.

Ash and Gulvi appeared on a sudden whirl of wind that even reached Gwyn and Jack. Gulvi was instantly recognisable; tall, striking, her wings huge and pale. Her blonde hair was tied back, and she wore her curved daggers around her waist. Her wings flared when she saw both of them. She raised her hand up in a brief greeting, and Gwyn returned the gesture.

Beside her, it could only have been Ash. He wasn’t as tall as her or even August, and he looked startlingly *human*. He wore jeans and a casual, striped shirt buttoned up the middle. His hair was a rich, honeyed brown and auburn, damp with water, curling freely, streaked through with waterweed. He was broader than August, with less wiry slimness and more musculature. He shoved his hands into his pockets as they both approached. He had no weapons, could almost have passed for a human who had just stepped out of the shower.

Jack realised why Gwyn had dressed so casually.

Gwyn stepped forwards to make sure Ash and Gulvi made it past the wards safely. Jack startled when he felt a warm, shimmery energy roll off Gwyn in waves. He realised that Gwyn could turn on his dra’ocht voluntarily. He looked like was practically sparkling with a good-natured, inviting light. But underneath it, Jack could feel the prickliness of it, a caustic, acidic edge. It was discordant.

‘La! Illicit meetings. My favourite,’ Gulvi purred, and Ash looked around the forest, looked at Jack curiously, then directed a winning smile at Gwyn.

‘If you’re gonna try and manipulate me, Gwyn, you might as well have done it in a bar. I mean, come on, man.’

Gwyn moved his head to indicate they should continue into the tent, and Ash and Gulvi followed him. Jack hung back, not wanting Ash or Gulvi behind him. He didn’t trust *either* of them. And his impressions weren’t helped when Gulvi looked over her shoulder and winked at him.

In the enclosed space of the tent, Jack felt the unease beneath his skin increase sharply. This was the first time he’d been in a room with so many fae since his time at the Seelie Court. He thought he’d gotten used to the increased glamour, but perhaps he’d sensitised to it again. He took a deep breath as he sat down on one of the low stools that Gwyn had organised in a semi-circle. As soon as his staff touched the floor, ice spiralled quickly out of it onto the ground. He raised it, but not before Pitch and Gulvi had seen.

Pitch looked at Jack, an unreadable expression on his face. Gulvi’s mouth slanted into a grin, and she looked at Jack with a mixture of venom and delight.

That was never a good thing.

Jack tucked his feet beneath him, curled his toes into the cold ground. Gwyn was using the dra'ocht far more than usual, even for him, it was almost as bad as when they'd first met at North's Workshop. Gulvi's energy was naturally disquieting. And Jack realised that Ash had a natural abundance of glamour, far easier than what Gwyn was putting out. It was good-natured and soft, naturally warm.

Ash leaned back on his stool and looked over at the weapon that had been set up, and then at Pitch.

'Yeah, okay, I get it. The Nightmare King is gone. You have a fancy weapon. And?'

He spoke easily, compared to August. His voice was open, cheerful, far less precise. But as Jack watched him, he could see the resemblance. It was in the jaw-line, in the smile, the cheekbones. It was in the way waterweed sprouted from his hair. It made him feel ill. He resisted the urge to wrap an arm around his ribs.

'I want to help August,' Gwyn said, and Ash laughed.

'No, you want him *gone*. Look, politics isn't my thing, which is why Gulvi has my back. I'm here to listen to you and give you a fair shot. Okay? That's it.'

'Ash...' Gulvi began, and Ash looked at her. She didn't finish her sentence, but her eyes were large and held mute appeal. For once, she didn't look like she was playing a game or an angle. Jack blinked when he realised that the fae had been right, Gulvi cared about Ash. And in that space of eye contact they created for themselves, Ash's face twisted and he sighed.

'It's not great,' he admitted. 'Six of her sisters have died.'

'Five have died,' Gulvi corrected, frowning, 'One is lost.'

Gwyn narrowed his eyes at that.

'Lost?'

'We are still looking for her body,' Gulvi said quietly. 'Ah, but, we do not expect much. She was very attached to her home. They have all withered away, kept from their lake.'

Jack could tell that Gwyn found that information intriguing. Jack's eyes kept straying back to Ash, and he couldn't stop being aware of the web of fae glamour in the tent, of Pitch sitting next to him, still and quiet. So far Pitch was doing what he did in meetings – waiting to be drawn into conversation. Jack had never felt particularly close to Pitch in meetings, he felt like Pitch was a stranger now.

'How many of the shadows are you holding for August?' Gwyn said, changing the subject.

Ash shrugged.

'I suppose it doesn't matter if you know, hey. Not that many, really. The Dullahan has the most. I have a few. Maybe twenty? I didn't want any more than that. I can't hold more without...changing.'

Ash directed a hard look at Pitch, mouth tightening. Jack thought he was going to say something, but he didn't. After a while he looked away again. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

'I'm not a fan of this.'

'No one is,' Gulvi said, voice flattening. Her wings flared, brushed the back of the tent. 'He won't



listen to you. There's no one else he'd ever listen to. And you have *tried*, Ash.'

'Ash, you can't deny that he's changed,' Gwyn said. 'There *must* be retribution for what he's done. The crimes he's committed against the fae are irredeemable. His Court is weak. If the Unseelie turn against him and demote him; worse, reduce his status to underfae...you know what will happen. Let me *help* you.'

Jack couldn't tear his eyes away from Ash. His hearing altered, dimmed the conversation, and then he could hear people talking, but couldn't understand what they were saying. It was all serious conversation, but he just couldn't stop seeing the resemblance. It wasn't even a close resemblance, but... it was there.

He felt trapped. He wanted to be back in the Workshop, or even better – out in the open air. Gwyn wanted him to pay attention, to see what he could pick up at the meeting, but all he could see was that this was a negotiation about *Augus*. Jack shifted and looked at the exit, and then frowned when he saw Gwyn had noticed.

'La!' Gulvi exclaimed in anger, glaring at Ash. It snapped Jack back into the conversation, and he had no idea what he'd missed. 'If you want to bury your head in the sand about it, then do it! You were with me when we buried Alva, and what did you say to me? Say it, or have you forgotten already?'

Ash shifted on the stool and then drew both of his legs – which had been stretched out – back towards himself.

'Gulvi, Jesus, you said we'd-'

'What did you say, Ash?' Gwyn said quietly, interjecting.

'I just said that he didn't used to be like this, okay? It didn't used to be like this. You know that. I know that. He used to be *good*.'

Jack laughed. The sound was so sudden, so abrasive, that he realised he'd have to justify himself. He glared at Ash, no longer intimidated, ignoring the way his arms and hands prickled with ice.

'You're just saying that. Augus is a monster.'

'Well,' Ash said, shaking his head at Jack, 'what a cute attitude to have. We're *all* monsters, dude. You're a monster. I'm a monster. But if you're trying to tell me that my brother is one hundred per cent evil, then I'm sorry, but that's just- Then you don't know him very well.'

Jack stood, his staff crackled frost lighting. Everyone else stood quickly in response. Gwyn's eyes widened in alarm.

'I know him well enough, okay? Look at Gulvi, she's meant to be your friend, how many of her sisters are dead?'

Ash's lips thinned, his face darkened. And then, Jack saw the resemblance more clearly. His vision blurred. Ash stepped forwards, and Jack took an involuntary step back.

'Your knowing him for a few months?' Ash said. 'That doesn't trump my growing up with him, buddy.'

'Buddy?' Jack said, a cold, frozen feeling stealing the breath from his lungs. '*Buddy*?'

'Jack,' Pitch said, and Jack stared at him, he'd forgotten he was even in the tent.

'No!' Jack said, pointing his staff at Ash to make a point, and accidentally sending a flare of frost lightning out.

'Fuck! Get your fucking frost spirit under control, *King!*' Ash said, having dodged the blast. It had ripped a hole through the tent.

'Me? Get *me* under control?' Jack said, turning back to Ash and walking forwards, feeling the ice building inside of him. 'What about your brother? Yeah? The one you're having a secret meeting about, because he's so out of control?'

Jack snapped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. The blast of ice he sent out from his staff was so immense it tore the tent apart. He jumped on the winds, was up in the air, tired of meetings, tired of playing *nice*. The more he looked at Ash, the more he saw someone who just wanted to defend evil. Gwyn glared at him, wide-eyed, and Jack shook his head at the warning he saw there.

'You think this is the way it should be?' Jack breathed. 'You-'

'Get out of here,' Gulvi said to Ash. 'I will deal with him.'

'You will *not*,' Pitch said, removing his axe from his back. Gwyn rushed forwards to intervene, but Jack saw the hungry, dangerous gleam in Gulvi's black, swan eyes and he was ready. The last time she'd antagonised him, he'd been dying. This time things were different.

'You want to do this? I'm stronger than you now,' Jack said, and she laughed.

'*Darling*, are you really?'

'Hate to love you and leave you,' Ash said quickly, 'But I'm off.'

'*Jack!*' Gwyn shouted, as he and Gulvi both shot up high into the air.

Jack saw a sign of Ash in waterhorse-form, galloping off through the woods, a dark brown, dappled blur. He shot off after him above the canopy. He angled his staff down, ice growing rapidly, violently along his arms. It would be so easy. Horses fell all the time. Their legs were fragile.

Something sliced through the air past him. He turned to see Gulvi, one of her daggers out and what looked like a throwing star in her right hand. He heard shouting beneath him, felt nothing but a whirl of wind inside of him. It was thrilling. His hands began to ice over, and he felt the icicles grow from the tips of his fingers, forming effortlessly as he hovered in the air.

Gulvi had always antagonised him. She'd always known things that could have been crucial for them to know, and always held them back to see what would happen. She was untrustworthy, unpredictable.

'You get one warning,' Jack shouted, and Gulvi crowed out a shriek of laughter.

'La! Boy! You've never done this before have you? It's not about *warnings!*'

She beat her huge wings towards him as he sent out the first, serious blast of frost lightning. He grinned as she was forced to dodge. He let the wind push him forwards while he called inclement weather as quickly as he could. Snow danced in front of her face, but he still saw her bring her hand back, throw something at him. He dropped and watched the throwing star disappear overhead.

Without thinking, he drew his free arm back and charged at her, flinging his arm forwards as hard as he could. The icicles on the end of his fingers shot forwards, rushed on by the winds, and she tried to bank out of the way, but wasn't fast enough. They pierced the underside of her wings, clipped off the edge of a pinion feather, and he saw her face twist with fury.

A small, distant part of him knew that this was bad. This was very bad. But as the icicles regrew on his fingers and he drew back to aim again, simultaneously sending ice and frost-lightning in her direction, he found that he just didn't care.

There was a sharp, shock of light beneath them – *Gwyn*, Jack realised – but Gwyn couldn't fly. Pitch couldn't fly. Ash was gone. There was no one to stop him now.

Gulvi rushed him. He pulled from what felt like an almost limitless reserve of ice and threw it at her through the conduit of his staff. She ducked and dodged, her face a determined mask. Jack saw the flash of metal too late, hissed as it sliced through his hair, narrowly missing his face. Silvery-blond filaments fell in front of his eyes.

He shook them out of the way and doubled his efforts. Sharp, wicked icicles flew in her direction. The first batch missed. Two of the second lot pierced the bridge of her wing, and she shrieked a high, fluting swan cry. The third lot knocked one of her daggers out of her hand, and Jack used the frost-lightning to strike at the other. He saw the second blade fall in flashes of dull, curved light, all the way to the ground.

Jack used the distraction to aim again, and the final lot of icicles thudded against the thick leather she wore braced around her torso. It didn't penetrate, but she screeched again, a sound of pure outrage.

Another flash of light from beneath them. It cast Jack's world into stark shadow, highlighted the fury on Gulvi's face as she charged at him.

Jack hesitated, swung backwards, sent out frost lightning that Gulvi ignored. She let it smash directly into her, taking each hit of ice as though it was nothing but a minor irritant.

'Frostling, you want claws?' she shouted, her voice thick and loud in the night air. Jack turned to flee when he realised that the ice wasn't going to stop her, that his icicles couldn't penetrate her armour. Fear curled up through him, a wild, animal instinct to get *away*. But she was faster than he was, riding on invisible winds that he couldn't feel, using her own powers to gain on him. 'You want to see claws, *boy*?'

Nails dug into him from behind, and Jack was turned roughly in her grip. She was far stronger than he could have predicted. He saw a wild, dark delight on her face. In that moment, behind the hammering of his fear, he recognised himself in that expression. He recognised the law of the forest; that there was the hunter, and there was the prey. He knew that wild, dark delight because he had felt it himself, he had wanted to be its champion. He knew then that he had been made prey, but he wasn't powerless, and he grabbed at her arm and sent ice all the way down it, laughing when she hissed at him.

'Frostling, you *are* more powerful,' she said in her raspy, fierce voice. 'More powerful than me. But not better at this game. Oh no. I'll show you *claws*.'

She drew her hand back, flexed her webbed, clawed fingers and then thrust forward with a blur of preternatural speed. Jack screamed when the hand pierced straight through his sweatshirt and into his ribcage, felt the crunch of bone, an explosion of pain as he gasped for air.

The injury was too great, his whole side immediately wet with blood. His staff dropped from numb fingers. He stared up at her, horrified, as she glared at him with a feral triumph.

‘If you ruin this for us, I will *ruin* you,’ she said, baring wicked, pointed teeth.

With that, she let go and bolted. Wings cutting loud slices through the air as she carved away into the night.

Jack fell. He landed hard on the ground, unable to call the wind in time. He pushed his hands up over the wet mess that was the whole right-hand side of his ribs, felt cold blood pulsing out of him. Something bubbled up inside of his throat and he coughed, wetly.

Pitch collapsed next to him, a wild, panicked look on his face, and Jack nearly laughed. Hadn’t he done that when they’d saved Pitch from the Nightmare King? They were always falling onto their knees by each other’s sides. It had to stop.

Gwyn ran up beside Pitch, staring bewildered at the wound. Jack coughed again, spraying blood over Pitch’s face. Pitch didn’t hesitate, he pulled up Jack’s sweatshirt, lifting his hand and thrusting it deep into Jack’s wound. He felt Pitch’s hand scrape against the broken mess of his ribs and tried to scream, but his lungs wouldn’t let him.

Pitch froze.

Jack blinked up at him, confused. Then horror crawled through him, a nauseating realisation. It turned his insides to liquid. He cried out, reaching weakly down for the scarf. Pitch knocked his hand away and pulled it off him with his free hand. It slid off easily, it had been completely sliced apart by Gulvi’s attack.

Pitch stared at it, mouth open. His eyes slid to Jack’s, pupils blowing out with fear.

‘No,’ Jack managed, pain forgotten in his terror. ‘No, no, no, stop it, *stop it, STOP!* Pitch! *STOP!*’

The scarf fell from Pitch’s limp fingers. His other hand twitched inside of Jack, and then Jack did scream, pain blasting thought from his mind.

‘*Why?*’ Pitch said, chest heaving.

Jack couldn’t concentrate. There was blood bubbling through his lungs, pouring out of his side, massing thick in his mouth. The betrayal on Pitch’s face was a terrible thing to behold. Pitch would know *everything*. Would know every fear he had been trying to keep locked away for so long. It didn’t feel good or cathartic. It felt like a hand scraping up against broken ribs. It felt like the cold, iced ground beneath him where his power still spilled out wildly.

Jack realised that Pitch wasn’t making the light yet, likely *couldn’t*.

His chest heaved on laughter. The pain crackling up through his lungs shattered his vision and he nearly blacked out.

He blinked his sight clear. Gwyn had a hand Pitch’s shoulder, a fierce, panicked look on his face.

‘You *will* pull it together, do you hear me? I didn’t march up that blasted mountain so that I could lose either one of you in the mess that this is. *Heal* him.’

Pitch blinked back at Jack, looking stunned.

'I can't,' he said. His voice was weaker than Jack had known it could be. 'I can't.'

Jack coughed up another spray of blood, swallowed the rest of it down, scared.

'Think...good things,' Jack said, and Pitch blinked at Jack and then started to laugh breathlessly. When he squeezed his eyes shut, tears tracked down both sides of his face.

The pain was threatening to pull him under, and Jack's heels slid on the cold ground, trying to gain some purchase, some way to escape the pain. No one was meant to have a hand touching their broken bones like this, not while they were awake. He could feel the hot warmth of Pitch's hand, fire against his ruined ribs.

What good things were there? Jack had destroyed everything. Pitch knew. He wasn't supposed to know, and he *knew*. What else was there? What other good things had there ever been in Pitch's life?

'*Seraphina*,' Jack gasped, and Pitch's face twisted, his eyes opened. His teeth ground together.

'You *bastard*. You-'

Jack's thoughts sluggishly scrambled back to when he was making frost-Seraphina. She'd been effective against the Nightmare King, what had he liked when he was making her?

'Her hair,' Jack said, voice wet, coughing blood. 'Her...smile.'

Pitch's hand flexed inside of Jack, and he whimpered. It was a tiny rasp of a noise. He could see that Pitch was furious with him, could tell that Pitch knew *exactly* how much pain he was causing. And the worst part was that all he could see on Pitch's face was the man he loved, no sign of the Nightmare King.

'Please,' Jack gasped. 'Try.'

*Hate me later.*

Pitch closed his eyes, he took deep breaths. He shook so hard that Jack could feel as a livewire of agitation in the fingers that were inside of him. Pitch's face cleared, his lips went slack. Seconds turned into a minute, and Jack felt himself move through all the stages of weakness he'd experienced when he was dying in slow-motion, in a matter of seconds. He realised that without Pitch's healing, even with his new, increased powers, this could be fatal. He was dying all over again.

The hand shifted inside of him again curiously, seeking. It was excruciating, but Jack refused to scream, tried not to agitate his lungs any further.

A brief, minor flare of golden light. Jack didn't see it, his eyes were closed, but he felt it as an unexpected glow of warmth in his body.

'Take his hand,' Pitch rasped, 'This will hurt.'

Jack was confused, disoriented, and then felt Gwyn's large hand fold over his, clasping it tightly.

Pitch did *something* with his hand, and Jack felt his ribs *shift* inside of his body and was beyond trying to repress screaming. His whole body arched, and he shrieked, cold flooding out of him in a sudden, vicious wave. Gwyn shouted in pain and let go of him quickly, but beyond that, Jack didn't understand anything except that the light he'd expected to feel *good*, felt like fingers moving his

bones back into place, checking the state of his lung. It was *wrong*.

Jack stared up blankly as he remembered August digging his fingers into the bite-wounds he'd made and he keened into blackness.

He blinked conscious again seconds later, the golden light pouring out of his wound even as blood traced a thick, black trickle down the side of his mouth. The pain was lessening, miraculously. He stared at Pitch as a horrible cycle of horror and wonder chased their way through his body. Pitch had grasped Jack's hand and was holding it so tightly that his bones were crushing together.

Pitch stared back, a tumult of expressions on his face, brow pulled together, mouth tight.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'No!' Jack said weakly, amazed that his ribs were already hurting less, his lung already healed.

'That's...he...it was a strategy. I didn't have a ch-'

'That's not *strategy* I'm feeling right now, Jack,' Pitch said, his whole body shaking with tension.

'It's *fear*.'

Jack rolled his eyes away, unable to stand that look on Pitch's face, the twisting hatred that responded inside of him, making him feel small and worthless. He couldn't look at Pitch. He noticed Gwyn standing over them both. He was holding his arm oddly across his chest, and Jack was surprised to see bloody, red marks streaking all the way along Gwyn's forearm.

Gwyn noticed, and looked down.

'It's healing,' he said.

'I did that?' Jack said.

'You did.'

'Sorry,' Jack said, and Gwyn glared. At first Jack thought it was because of the wound he'd made with his ice, and then he realised that he'd ruined the meeting. He'd lost his composure. All of this was because of him. Even the scarf being destroyed. Makara's scarf, that he'd put so much time and effort into. All of this was because he couldn't keep it together for one meeting.

'Oh,' Jack breathed, head slumping back towards the ground. Nothing made any sense.

Pitch's fingers withdrew from his wound in increments. The pain flared and lessened as his fingertips made contact with the brokenness inside of him.

'I just don't understand *why*,' Pitch said, and Jack didn't have any answers for him. Didn't want to think about it. Couldn't find the energy to explain why, because it would mean having to think about what caused him to need the scarf in the first place, and he just didn't want to *think* about it.

'*Jack*,' Pitch said, voice breaking.

'It's okay,' Jack breathed, dazed. He was going to pass out again. He was nearly healed, and he was going to pass out again, he couldn't believe it.

Pitch made a thick, pained sound that roused Jack out of his numbness. Jack opened his eyes just as Pitch withdrew his hand fully, the skin newly healed over Jack's ribs. He wouldn't even have a scar.

Pitch staggered upright, steadying himself with his hand, ignoring the offer of Gwyn's still-healing arm. He picked up the axe where he'd dropped it on the ground. He blinked at Jack with an empty expression on his face.

He disappeared into the shadows, and was gone.

## Chapter End Notes

\*runs away\*

In our next chapter, 'Not So Open After All,' a certain King of the Seelie Court is *furious* that Jack ruined the meeting. \*ignores the fact that Pitch has disappeared.\*

# Not So Open After All

## Chapter Notes

Thank you SO MUCH for all your kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks and comments. Honestly, they make my days and nights. It's just awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A cool breeze ruffled his hair. He was far beyond the magical boundaries that Gwyn had established. His sweatshirt was ripped and ruined and stained with blood. His hands soaked and sticky. None of it mattered.

Jack stared at the space where Pitch had teleported through the shadows. The clutter of feelings inside of his mind, his body, were too strong to contain. He was spilling over. He turned to Gwyn, the only person who would know what to do now. He froze when he saw the look on Gwyn's face. Gwyn wasn't looking at the space where Pitch had disappeared. He was glaring at Jack, his expression black and murderous. Jack instinctively pushed himself upright. That was an expression he wanted to get away from.

Jack scrambled backwards as Gwyn stalked forwards, teeth bared. Gwyn bent down, lashed out, grabbed Jack by the shoulder and then the world dissolved into light.

Jack winced as he was shoved down into a wooden chair – the round table room at the Workshop – and he raised a hand to his newly-healed ribs. They were healed, but sore. They felt fragile, as though the bone wasn't strong, the skin not yet elastic enough to support his insides. It was a strange feeling, he'd never experienced anything like it before. It had been the first time Pitch had used his golden light to heal Jack from a wound like this. The experience of having a hand in his abdomen wasn't something he cared to repeat in a hurry.

Jack tried to get up, but Gwyn pushed him back into the chair again.

'You, *stay there*,' he snarled, and then abruptly flashed out of the room. Jack realised he'd forgotten his staff.

He absently checked for a scarf that wasn't there; it was shredded and lying on the ground in a forest he didn't recognise and likely wouldn't visit again.

*Where did Pitch go?*

Jack couldn't erase from his mind the look he'd seen on Pitch's face before he'd disappeared. That wasn't a careful, neutral expression that hid distress, it was true blankness, as though someone had washed him clean of all thought. That depth of bleakness frightened Jack.

Panic welled somewhere deep inside of him, far below the numbness that ruled at the front of his mind.

How would they find out where he'd gone? What if he didn't come back? What if – *Oh god*, Jack thought – he'd gone to fight August?

Jack's breathing was uneven when Gwyn returned and threw his staff at him. Jack caught it



awkwardly, fumbling his fingers around it. He stilled when the tip of a recurve bow prodded him hard in the sternum. Gwyn glared at him.

‘Do you have *any* idea what you’ve likely done? What you’ve ruined?’

Jack tried to push the tip of the bow away with his free hand, and then winced when Gwyn simply pushed harder, eyebrows drawing together, mouth tightening. Jack swallowed. He couldn’t focus properly. He wasn’t entirely sure what had happened. One moment they’d been in a meeting, the dra’ocht had been too strong, he was overwhelmed. The next...

*I’ll show you claws...*

Jack blinked at Gwyn, dazed.

Where was Pitch?

And Pitch had realised...

Jack closed his eyes. His ribs hurt. The scent of blood was heavy and thick in the air. He could still taste it in his mouth, clinging to his teeth and gums. He raised his hand to his cheek and felt a drying trail of the stuff.

‘Well?’ Gwyn ground out. ‘You-’

‘You should be looking for Pitch,’ Jack managed, his voice faint. He felt so strange. He should be panicking, hyperventilating, but there was only that pervasive numbness. He noticed strange things. His staff felt cold against his fingers. Gwyn’s bow had a blunt edge that felt like a bruise against his chest. He could feel each of the individual ribs that had been broken, even though they were whole again. They felt...oddly bendable. His throat hurt.

Pitch was gone.

Jack’s eyes flew open when Gwyn threw his recurve bow onto the wooden table and bodily picked him up, shaking him.

‘This is *bigger* than you! It is, so help me, bigger than *Pitch*! This doesn’t end until August is off the throne, and if you want to have a chance, ever again, of living a life outside of this toy factory, then you will pull yourself together and-’

Jack felt a crack appear in the numbness, and through it came anger.

‘What the hell did you expect!’ Jack said, flying backwards out of Gwyn’s grip and levelling his staff at him. ‘I tried warning you, but you have been so preoccupied with your goddamned *Kingdom* that you don’t actually listen to me!’

‘Pitch has disappeared,’ Gwyn said, a fiery anger sparking in turn. ‘If you have pushed him over the edge *again*, I-’

‘Again? Are you serious? Who needed him at that battle in the first place because you couldn’t think of what else to do? Huh? You came to *us*. You were the one who visited the Workshop, and asked for *our* help.’

‘I would have a better time accepting this argument, if Ash had actually done something to provoke you in the first place. But he did *not*. I saw the look on your face when you were tracking him through the forest, so did Gulvi. You were lucky she didn’t rip you apart. She would have been

well within her rights to-

‘Why are you always defending her? She-’

‘She didn’t provoke you!’ Gwyn roared, his voice thunderous. ‘She was on her best behaviour, because she knew *you* would be there! You rewarded that show of faith by acting like a spoiled, weak child. I cannot believe that-’

‘What was with the dra’ocht? Huh? You *know* how I react to that. Did you even *think* about what that would do to me? You’ve had it switched off, all this time, and then suddenly you roll it out and what I’m just supposed to be unaffected by it? I panicked, sure, but *you* were the one who made mistakes in this. I know what my excuse is, what the hell is yours?’

Gwyn’s hands clenched into fists, his whole body tensed. He looked like – in that moment – he wanted nothing more than to smash Jack into the ground. Then, Jack realised, Gwyn was trembling. It was a fine, repressed movement, hardly noticeable. He looked...exhausted.

‘I’d forgotten,’ Gwyn said, then slammed his fist into the table so hard that the whole table jumped off the floor. Jack stared, wide-eyed. It was a huge, immense table made of solid, rough-cut hardwood. The show of strength was frightening.

‘We need them,’ Gwyn rasped. ‘And you- I should have seen it. This wouldn’t have happened if you were still firmly fixed in resolve. Your centre is changing again.’

‘What?’ Jack shook his head in disbelief. ‘No! I’m resolved to see this through. I am, I’m-’

‘The Jack whose centre was resolve would have held that reaction *back* until the end of the meeting. That was- I don’t know what that was. I *know* that look. I’ve seen it on the battlefield. You would have killed him. You would have killed a member of the fae Inner Court for no other reason than you didn’t want to hear his side of the story, and he reminded you of his brother. Very well done.’

Jack froze, swallowed.

‘You should be out there looking for Pitch,’ Jack said, and Gwyn’s lip rose in a snarl.

‘If you tell me what to do, one more time, I will show you why they made *me* King, and you won’t like it.’

‘*Someone* should be looking for Pitch!’ Jack shouted, and Gwyn laughed coldly.

‘If he’s gone to Augus, he’s already possessed again and he will not survive – as you said. No, I am going to save the situation I *can* save. If Pitch has *not* gone after Augus, then he will no doubt return.’

‘You’re heartless,’ Jack said, staring. ‘I *always* suspected that you were, from the very beginning. And now, actually, it’s all starting to come together. What, you can be *nice* as long as it gets you something you want?’

Gwyn stared at him, shocked. His mouth had fallen open. The expression lasted only a second, and then Gwyn’s face transformed into an expression of fury.

‘Do you think I want this?’

‘You don’t even *care* that he’s-’

‘Do you think that I leave here and go back to the Seelie Court, and listen – *heartlessly* – while I have fae requesting audiences with me, wasting away to skin and bone, taken away from their land, with me unable to do anything except what I *just* tried to do; do you think I want that? When was the last time you held a dying rusalka in your arms, Jack? *When?*’

Jack flew backwards when Gwyn took a step towards him. That expression was back again.

‘Cool it,’ Jack said hastily, ‘Maybe you just need a break.’

It was the wrong thing to say. Gwyn laughed at him, but the sound was brittle. He raised his arms up and caught Jack by his blood-stained sweatshirt before Jack could swoop up out of the way, and then pinned Jack to the wall with one strong hand.

‘A break?’ Gwyn said, voice bleached and dark. Jack blinked at him, feeling his anger trickle away, replaced by numbness once more. Jack couldn’t think of what to say. It was obvious that he and Pitch weren’t the only ones who weren’t entirely stable, but Jack’s survival instinct screamed at him to hold off from saying that.

‘What are you doing?’ North’s voice, deeper and more dangerous than Jack had ever heard it. Jack turned to see him standing in the doorway, a look of menace and horror on his face. ‘You come into my home, Jack looking like this? Put him *down*.’

‘This is not about you,’ Gwyn said, and Jack stared at Gwyn for having the audacity to dismiss North so easily.

‘No?’ North said, walking into the room properly. He used his considerable height and bulk to cut an imposing, menacing figure. ‘You are being in *my* home. You are not *my* King. Put him *down*.’

Gwyn let go of Jack suddenly, stepping back, lowering his hands by his sides. He glared at North, and it was the first time that Jack actually thought North might have his work cut out for him. Gwyn wasn’t just physically powerful or adept with a sword, the light he made was terrifying, as rare as it was to even see. Jack didn’t think North could take on the King of the Seelie fae and come out unscathed.

‘What is this?’ North said, pointing at Jack’s sweatshirt, at the bloody mess that his clothing had become.

Gwyn and Jack shared a single look. It was strange that after their fight, after Jack being certain that they could have easily started attacking each other if enough words were exchanged, they still maintained this strange conspiracy. So much time spent working together, hiding things from the Guardians, from Pitch, meant that it was habit to seek out each other’s eyes to check what they were willing to say. Gwyn looked away first and rubbed a hand over his forehead.

‘This *creature* ruined a meeting we had planned. He was attacked. Pitch healed him.’

‘Where is Pitch?’ North said, expression grim. He radiated a palpable anger.

Jack laughed despairingly, staring at Gwyn. Pitch was *probably* off doing exactly what August wanted him to do when he found out about what had happened.

‘Is that my fault too?’ Jack said, and sparks flew to Gwyn’s eyes at the question.

‘What do you think?’ Gwyn said, and Jack shook his head.

‘You won’t look for him? Really?’ Jack said, and Gwyn’s mouth tightened. He didn’t need the

reply, he saw the denial. He took a deep shuddering breath. His ribs ached.

‘The wind could take me,’ Jack said, absently. ‘The wind can track anything.’

‘No!’ Gwyn shouted. ‘No! Are you both so determined to play directly into his hands? You don’t know what Pitch has done, where he’s gone, and if you do *anything* that takes you past the boundaries of these wards, your life is in immediate danger. Will you waste his healing?’

‘It’s not worth anything if he’s gone!’ Jack cried, voice splintering. ‘It’s not worth *anything!*’

North had been watching silently, frowning, but at Jack’s outburst he stepped between the two of them, holding his hands out as though separating an active fight. He stared at Jack, concerned, but he talked to Gwyn.

‘Gwyn, you are pushing him too hard, and yourself. I am knowing what fatigue looks like. For the both of you. Leave us, and come back when you are refreshed.’

Gwyn glared at North, and then sighed.

‘You might be right,’ Gwyn said grudgingly. ‘But I have tasks that must be seen to and completed.’

Gwyn looked past North to Jack, eyebrows pulling together.

‘I do hope he returns.’

His body turned incandescent, and he was gone, leaving the room somehow dimmer in his absence.

Jack sagged back against the wall. He was dizzy, his vision was blurred. There was pain threading through him, strange and sharp.

He couldn’t have gone through all of that, just to lose Pitch for good. He *couldn’t*.

And yet...wasn’t that how his world worked?

Jack flinched when he felt a hand on his shoulder, but was too dazed to do anything but follow when it urged him away from the wall. He waited for memories to assail him, but even they had sunk too far inside to be heard. He stumbled forwards and then found his feet properly, and was led through the Workshop. He looked down at the floor. It was well cleaned, but every now and then he saw a smear of glitter or paint.

He was led into a tiled room, and then he heard murmurs, something that could have been a question, and then footsteps disappearing. Jack closed his eyes, swayed. Time whirled on its own peculiar axis. Beneath the lancing, needle-like pain of missing Pitch, was a deep, dirty fear beneath it.

*He knows.*

North returned and lay something down nearby. Then he approached Jack again and touched the drying trickle of blood at his chin with delicacy.

‘Jack Frost,’ North rumbled, and Jack blinked up at him, hollow. ‘You are needing a shower. This is...a lot of blood.’

Jack looked around and saw that he was in a bathroom. It wasn’t one he was familiar with, and he wondered if it belonged to the yeti, or to North. There were tiny, sparkling fairylights clinging to

the shower rail. The tiles were a deep, mellow ochre. Every now and then, a tile had been glazed with a Christmas tree, a gingerbread man, the twinned antlers of reindeer. The fixtures of the shower itself were clean, chrome, stylish. It was a mix of comfort and technology. Jack blinked. This must have been North's bathroom. It occurred to him that he didn't even know where the man slept.

North walked past him and turned the shower on, and then adjusted the temperature, looking back at Jack and narrowing his eyes.

'I am guessing cold? But I am making it lukewarm, and you can be deciding what works best.'

He held his hand under the spray and then nodded in satisfaction, indicating the towel and new clothing he'd laid out on a wooden bench nearby. The new sweatshirt was also dark grey, and Jack blinked to see it.

'Jack...' North said uncertainly. 'Will you be needing help?'

'What?' Jack said, faintly. 'No. No. Just...something bad has happened. Pitch should be here and...'

*...He's not.*

North sighed, nodded – though it was clear he didn't quite understand what was going on – then began to leave. He paused, returned and crouched in front of Jack, so that their eyes were at a more even level. Jack stared at him and North stared back, eyes wide, as though he could find answers in Jack's very expression.

'Jack, I will be waiting just outside. If you need any help, call me, yes?'

'Uh, sure.'

North smiled and then walked out of the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

Jack didn't move for several minutes, but finally his skin started prickling unpleasantly where blood was drying. He laid his staff on the ground. He gingerly pulled off his sweatshirt, dropping it to the floor when he couldn't see anywhere else to leave it. The dark grey material was almost black with blood, and he was shocked to see a wild, crazed frost across the entirety of the fabric.

He looked down at his torso and he closed his eyes. There was so much blood, his scars were almost completely covered. It occurred to him that Pitch may not have even seen them, with the amount of blood, the sweatshirt in the way, the chaos. A spark of hope flew through him, and then he closed his eyes.

*But he would know they're there, maybe. Who knows how much he read? Enough.*

Jack stepped out of his pants and walked into the shower, wincing at the heat of the water. It was only lukewarm, but Jack had to adjust the taps anyway. His body temperature had dropped after creating so much ice. In the end, even the colder water felt warm as it cascaded over his body.

He realised as he started to scrub at the blood, he'd never had to do this before. The last time he'd been badly injured, he'd been unconscious when Makara had cleaned him. It was a miracle he hadn't woken up during that whole process, given how much scrubbing he needed to do now. A sign of how close he'd been to dying, even then. He closed his eyes as blood streamed down his skin, pooled around his feet, drained away.

His thoughts wouldn't resolve. One moment he was glad Pitch had been able to make the golden

light. The next, he felt a wretched hatred swirl through him that he'd referred to Seraphina *again*, in order to make it happen. He didn't know what he'd do with himself if Pitch was possessed with the shadows again.

His mind fled from the idea that Pitch *knew*.

Jack washed his face with a fresh bar of soap; so fresh, he had to unwrap it. It smelled of pine and tea-tree oil, astringent and antiseptic. He opened his mouth and let water fall into it, swirling it around and spitting it out until he didn't taste blood anymore. He didn't know when it had happened, but at some point he'd gotten blood in his hair. There were sprays of it on the backs of his hands. No wonder he felt tired. All that power back, and he was still dealing with these moments of crushing fatigue brought on by conflict.

He shut off the shower and shook droplets of water from his hair. The rest froze into a fine, light frost that he could simply rub out of his hair and let fall as frost particles. He walked woodenly over to the bench and pulled on the new clothing even though he was still damp. Water eventually froze, and then he could brush it off, or the ice crystals would fall away on their own.

He felt a little more himself with the new clothing, clean again. He wondered if he should create a running tally of how many sweatshirts he'd gone through so far.

He picked up his staff and walked out hesitantly, hoping he hadn't taken too long. It was hard to remove all of the blood.

North stood up as soon as he saw Jack.

'Kitchens, I am thinking,' North said, and Jack nodded because he knew North was waiting for a response, and Jack couldn't think of anything else to do.

Once in the kitchens, Jack sat down at one of the broad benches where the yeti had their meals. North didn't sit down straight away, walking into the kitchen proper and returning ten minutes later. He set down two different drinks in front of Jack. One was a stout, pale mug, filled with hot chocolate and chocolate shavings, chocolate dust and marshmallows. It smelled also of cinnamon and chilli, a gentle bite in the inside of Jack's nose. The other was a tall glass filled with iced chocolate; milk, chocolate syrup, ice blocks, and a hefty scoop of ice cream, topped with whipped cream and more chocolate syrup. Jack stared at both.

'That way you can be making choice, yes?'

Jack smiled hesitantly at the sheer whimsy of it. His whole life had fallen into chaos, and this didn't seem so strange. Of course North would do something like this. Jack sniffed at the hot chocolate curiously, and then picked up a melting marshmallow and touched his tongue to it awkwardly, testing the temperature. It was very hot, but he ate it anyway, and then pulled the iced chocolate towards himself. He trailed his finger down the condensation and watched as frost crisped along the outside of the glass.

'Now, we are having a small chat, Jack. I am insisting on this.'

Jack didn't look at North. He stirred his iced chocolate with the long spoon, and then after a few minutes stopped and pushed the glass away. He owed North more than what he'd been saying, and now that Pitch knew, there was no point hiding everything from the Guardians anymore. But he didn't want to say the whole story either. North would look at him and it wouldn't be the same anymore.

‘Something happened that we couldn’t tell Pitch about,’ Jack said. ‘Something happened to me...when we tested the weapons. It was important that Pitch didn’t read my fears about it. It still *is* important. So, I went to see Makara.’

Jack could tell from the way North stiffened, that Bunnymund hadn’t told him. Out of all the things that had happened between he and Bunnymund lately, the fact that Bunnymund had actually kept Jack’s secret – even from North – filled him with an unexpected warmth.

‘That’s why I was gone for so long. That and I needed the sleep. Like, I really needed a lot of sleep.’

‘Jack, did you go and see Makara alone?’ North said softly, and Jack nodded.

‘He’s not so bad, you know? He reminds me of me a little bit. It sounds stupid, because obviously- Well, I don’t look like the way most people think he looks. But I feel like people see a side of him that isn’t the whole picture. Like with me, people just – in the past at least – saw some stupid kid, or you know, someone who just caused trouble. And those things were true, that was...’ *a part of who I was.*

*Not so much now though, huh?*

Jack sighed and dipped his finger into the whipped cream decorating the iced chocolate. He felt wrong to be sitting there, not actively hunting the world over for Pitch. But Gwyn was right. If Jack went after him half-cocked, without a plan, they would both be playing into August’s hands. That was even if he’d gone to see August. Jack had the distinct impression that Pitch had been trying to get away from *Jack*.

‘I got the scarf. And...well, then tonight, Gwyn held a secret meeting with me and Pitch, Ash and Gulvi. Ah, the Glashtyn. You know him?’

North nodded, but didn’t say anything. Jack sipped iced chocolate through the straw and paused a moment, surprised at the flavour.

‘This is good,’ Jack said, and North smiled.

‘Go on,’ North encouraged.

‘I don’t like Gulvi. She rubs me the wrong way. And Ash is just- Everyone says that he’s alright, even Pitch, but he’s a member of August’s Court. He took a school hostage just like the others did. Primary school kids, North. How good is he really?’

North tilted his head to the side and looked off into the distance, considering.

‘What was the meeting for?’

‘I don’t actually really know,’ Jack said, lowering his forehead to the table. ‘Gwyn is kinda cagey. I probably would have found out if I’d just waited long enough.’

‘I do not like the way he is treating you,’ North said, voice deepening again and Jack shook his head.

‘Me either. But North I ruined the meeting. I was just angry, and then, I mean, well you’ve seen what my frost does these days. I...’

*...Wanted to kill someone.*

‘But the worst part is that when I was injured – by Gulvi, I mean obviously – the scarf was torn.’

North sighed, he looked sympathetic. Jack continued.

‘Pitch came over to heal me and he just, I mean, he wasn’t supposed to find out. It was-’

‘-Obviously being something that would make him behave recklessly, yes?’

Jack took a shallow breath, then another. His ribs still didn’t feel right. He shook his head, then shook it again rapidly, not knowing how to respond, piles of words straining inside of him. The panic was back again, and he was just *sitting* there, and-

Jack stood.

‘He just *left*. He doesn’t think he’ll survive possession again, and if he’s gone to August, that might be the last time I ever- The last time and I just- I don’t know what’s happening to me, North, I don’t *know*. Gwyn says my centre is changing again, is that even possible? It’s obviously not changing back to *fun*. So what now? What am I supposed to do now?’

North stood, but Jack backed away, breathing faster.

‘There’s still shadows left over. August is still in power. Pitch is *vulnerable*, he’s...what can I do? I destroyed the sword, we made the weapons, it turns out when the Nightmare King is gone, the only thing I can do is nearly kill a couple of fae and-’

‘Jack, listen to me, you-’

‘You’re all being nice to me but you don’t understand how badly I’ve messed things up this time.’

Jack laughed weakly, stumbled backwards, and then hit warmth; the shape of a body. At the same time, North straightened and stared over Jack’s shoulder, looked like he’d seen a ghost.

Jack whirled around. Pitch stood half in the shadows, where he must have teleported, looking worn. He stared at Jack, lips thinner than usual, one hand clenched into a bloody fist at his side. The spray of Jack’s blood across his face, where Jack had coughed it up earlier, looked even more vivid and disturbing than it had in the forest.

Jack was torn between relief that Pitch was alive, unpossessed; and horrified because Pitch *knew*. Pitch would want to *talk* about it, and Jack didn’t want to, he couldn’t. When he brought Pitch back from the grip of the living shadows, it was *never* supposed to be like this. It was supposed to be embracing and lying down alongside one another and sleepy night kisses and Kostroma.

‘I’ll take it from here, North,’ Pitch said, not removing his steady, yellow gaze from Jack’s.

‘Pitch, it is good to see you. However, I really am not thinking that now is the time for-’

Pitch bared his teeth and glared at North, taking a furious step forwards.

‘I said, *I’ll take it from here.*’ This is between Jack and I.’

Jack couldn’t look away from the blood on Pitch’s fingers. His heart was pounding a hard, unforgiving rhythm in his chest. August had stepped around him and had blood on his fingers, and then he’d reached up and: *‘It would be rude of me not to share, would you like to try some?’* Fear curled up and lashed him, rooting him to the ground, forcing the sensation of blood swiped across his lips to return, vivid.



Pitch's eyes widened and he stared at Jack, his chest heaving violently. Jack tore his gaze away from Pitch's hand, and then stared fixedly at a burn mark on the wooden bench.

'He is not needing your anger,' North said, calmly.

'*Nicholas!*' Pitch shouted, 'this isn't about you!'

Jack realised that if he didn't do something, North and Pitch were going to start arguing. And as much as Jack didn't want to talk to Pitch about *anything*, he knew he had to talk to Pitch. It was a certainty that stretched all the way down his spine, and sank claws into the unevenness of his breathing.

'North,' Jack said, 'Pitch is right. We-'

Jack never got a chance to finish his sentence, because Pitch stepped forwards, interlocked his hand with Jack's and then spun them both away through the darkness.

\*

They landed in Pitch's old room in the Workshop, a short distance away.

Jack was surprised that Pitch had chosen it, of all places, given he didn't sleep there anymore. The room still smelled familiar. The armchair that Pitch was going to take back to Kostroma rested benignly in the corner. Jack looked around, then made a small sound when Pitch withdrew his hand from Jack's and took several steps back.

In the shadows, Pitch looked tired. Sad.

'You lied to me,' Pitch said, quietly. He sounded subdued, betrayed.

Jack didn't know what to say. Those were words that almost no one ever said to him. It felt awful, the accusation of it. And the worst part was that it was true.

'I had to,' Jack said.

'You lied to me about *this*,' Pitch said, and Jack's hand tightened on his staff. He drew a ragged breath. He felt trapped. He knew what '*this*' meant.

'I had to!'

'How open are you really, Jack?' Pitch said, disbelieving.

'Well, you can read it all now, can't you?' Jack said, staring at Pitch in horror. 'Isn't it all there? I don't even have to say anything and you *know*.'

'I don't understand,' Pitch said, closing his eyes briefly, raising the back of his wrist to his forehead. 'What would possess you to-'

'You lied too!' Jack said, pain twisting so hard inside his chest that he staggered backwards. He hadn't wanted to talk about *any* of this. But in this room, with Pitch right there, the faint smell of cinnamon and Pitch around him...

'I...excuse me?' Pitch said, blankly.

'You said you wouldn't go *anywhere!*'

The words rattled out between them. The only sound remaining were the shaky gasps of Jack's breathing. He'd bent double, a hand pressing into his sternum, staring at the floor. His whole body hurt. All those times that Pitch had ever said that he wasn't going anywhere, that he wouldn't, that he would *stay*... Jack had wanted so desperately to believe him. Had even started – in the end – to believe him. He'd stopped listening to that small voice telling him that no one ever stuck around, and he'd *tried so hard*...

Jack made a sound of anguish, it twisted up in the back of his throat and stayed there.

*You didn't stay.*

'I...' Pitch said, and Jack screwed his eyes shut, blocked the whole room out.

*It wasn't supposed to be like this.*

'You *left*,' Jack said, voice breaking.

'Jack...' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head violently. He forced himself upright, pointed at Pitch.

'You don't get to say my name like that! Not like *that*. You *left*! You don't get to come back and...expect that it's going to be like it was! It's not! Things aren't the same! I had to deal with this, practically on my *own*.'

Jack threw his staff onto Pitch's bed, aware that if he didn't let go of it, his frost would just whirl right out of him like it had during the meeting. He raised his hands to his head and grasped at his hair, trying to calm himself down. Everything hurt. The ice around his heart was cracking. He'd worked so hard to keep it there, *so hard*, but Pitch accusing him of lying, when all Jack had done over the past months was...

'No one else cared as much as I did!' Jack shouted. '*No one* else would have gotten you back! Okay? No one! I had to change! I was changing anyway, but I had to change! Who else would have done it? I *needed* you, and you *left*!'

Pitch's breath hissed out of him and he took a step forwards, and then another, his face twisted up in pain.

'Jack, I am so, *so* sorry.'

'Do you remember, before we left, the things you said to me? I can't *stop* remembering them. You made me believe them and then you just- You- It *all* went away. You told me that lying down on your bed wouldn't be the last time we had together. That you didn't plan on leaving my side. That you wouldn't go *anywhere*.'

Jack's eyes were dry, it felt like an injustice. Panic rose like a tidal wave inside of him. He couldn't stop *speaking*.

'You asked me to save you,' Jack said, voice low, 'and I did. But there was no one to save me, Pitch.'

Jack bent over himself again, hating that he was laying himself bare like this. After so long wearing the scarf, so long keeping his thoughts under control, this was a train wreck. Pitch would realise how *weak* he was, how desperate, how needy. It should have gone differently at the gymnasium. He'd thought about where they'd gone wrong so many times. It should have-

'It should have been me,' Jack said, heavily. 'You should have *let* me get possessed by those

shadows. You-'

'Jack, I want you to look at me. *Jack*,' Pitch said, stepping closer, and Jack stumbled until his back hit the wall. His ribs throbbed. Fear was a pulsing, living thing inside of him. Pitch's voice – calm and everything that Jack had wanted over the time that had passed – it was too much.

'Everything was going just fine before I met you,' Jack said, staring at him. 'Just *fine*. You, you made me believe in you! You made me *love*-'

Jack choked on the word. He looked away, terrified. Pitch made a sympathetic sound in response, and Jack wanted to scrape it out of his ears. He didn't want gentle, didn't want succour. Didn't want to *believe* that it was a possibility anymore.

'Easy,' Pitch said, his hands up and palms outward. 'Easy, Jack. Just...easy now.'

Pitch walked forwards, keeping his hands up. Jack placed his hands over his face, not wanting to be in the same room, scared that it was going to go away again. After all, hadn't the Nightmare King come to him and pretended to be Pitch? And it had felt so *real*. Maybe this was all an extended nightmare, and Jack was just...captured and in the dark somewhere, locked away, dreaming the possibility of Pitch once more.

'Oh,' Pitch said, voice strained. '*Jack*.'

Hearing his name in that tone of voice was a shaft of heat that hit hard at the wall of ice around his heart. He shook violently, wanting to lurch forwards into Pitch, wanting impossible things to be real again.

'Jack, I shouldn't have- I shouldn't have left.'

Jack felt weak when Pitch's palm ghosted across his shoulder. Then Pitch feathered tacky fingers through Jack's hair, and Jack wanted it to be like it was, he wanted-

Too quickly, the memory of August's fingers carding through his hair blew through him, scoured him out. Jack jolted sideways, falling hard to the floor, curling in on himself when he realised what he'd just done.

Pitch growled and Jack winced, thinking – for a second – that he'd done something wrong.

'I will *murder* him!' Pitch shouted, and Jack pushed himself upright as Pitch walked towards the thickest mass of shadows in the room. Jack's muscles bunched, realising that if he didn't stop Pitch, this was going to be it – the thing that ruined everything. He couldn't let Pitch leave.

'*WAIT!*'

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Cold Places,' well... uh...

# Cold Places

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the comments, subscriptions, bookmarks and omg everything else. I also really enjoy the community over at [Tumblr](#), which has been altogether tremendously motivational. You guys rock. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack flew forwards as quickly as he could. He slammed into Pitch just as he started to fade into shadow. Jack's heart was a hammer of fear so loud that it felt like thunder bursting overhead. He dug his fingers into Pitch's robe and dragged him down to the ground with the force of his impact.

Pitch turned, staring at Jack wide-eyed.

'You can't,' Jack gasped. 'You can't, he *wanted* this! He just wanted to hurt you!'

Jack backed off hurriedly when Pitch pushed himself upright, giving Jack an incredulous look, face wiped of all fury.

'Hurt *me*,' Pitch said, disbelieving.

'He compelled me to tell you. Either as the Nightmare King, or...as you. He- Pitch, whatever you want to do to him, that's what he *wants*.'

Pitch breathed raggedly. As silence stretched between them, their coarse, uneven breaths competed with each other. Jack pressed his hands over his sternum again. Pitch had gone to touch his hair and Jack had *wanted* it and then...

'I can't let this go,' Pitch rasped. 'What he did to you. I- He-'

'It was stupid. It was stupid and almost nothing happened,' Jack said in a rush, and Pitch's brows fell, his face slackened when he heard those words. Pitch turned so pale that Jack's blood spattered across his cheeks shone in stark contrast.

'Almost nothing,' Pitch said, sounding sick. He took a step forwards and his eyes narrowed, a strange light entered them. 'Then describe it to me. If it was *nothing*, it should be easy to talk about, should it not?'

Jack's mind went blank with dread, words wouldn't come to his mouth. He couldn't talk about it, hadn't been able to talk about it with anyone, but that was because it was *his* fault, it was because he'd done the *wrong* thing, because-

His thoughts were cut off at the dismayed expression on Pitch's face.

'What?' Jack said.

Pitch shook his head, wordless. It was rare that Jack saw him without a sentence at his disposal. It made Jack uneasy. It was different to the sympathy that the other Guardians had been offering him. It was as though Pitch had seen something horrifying.

Pitch raised a shaking, bloodied hand and dragged it through his hair, disturbing it. He turned away from Jack and took several deep breaths, shoulders shuddering with the motions. Jack was bewildered at Pitch's level of distress, wondered if the removal of the scarf had made Jack's fears seem larger than they were, somehow.

'I'm not broken,' Jack said. Pitch turned to him. He looked wrecked.

'He didn't break me like he thought he would,' Jack continued, stubbornly. 'He didn't have time. I got away.'

Pitch hissed and walked forwards, approaching Jack slowly.

'Did you get away, Jack? Do you feel free? Unhaunted? Unbroken?'

Jack's mouth dropped open. No, this wasn't the way this conversation was supposed to go. Pitch wasn't supposed to turn it around like that. He was supposed to understand that Jack was over-reacting. He was supposed to know the right words to say to remind Jack that he hadn't really been through anything at all.

'Stop it,' Jack said, and Pitch shook his head at Jack in despair, a glimmer of anger visible in the sparks in his eyes.

'You blame yourself for this thing that you tell me was *almost nothing*, that you tell me didn't break you. What are the flashbacks like?'

*No, they're not- I'm not having...*

'Stop it!' Jack shouted, digging his fingernails into his palms. 'I can't have this conversation with you! You're only being like this because it hurts you too. You're only hurting me because you don't know how to deal with it either!'

Pitch froze, realisation dawning across his features. He made a sound of frustration. At first Jack thought it was meant for him, then realised Pitch meant it for himself.

'You can't just go after him,' Jack stressed, blinking hard as his vision blurred again. He took a deep breath, summoned his concentration. 'You *can't*. You said you wouldn't survive being possessed again.'

'I said I *likely* wouldn't survive it.'

'This isn't worth risking that,' Jack said, his voice breaking. 'Why won't you *listen* to me?'

'I can't *stop* listening to you! All I hear, all the fears I see are from *you*!' Pitch shouted, closing his eyes. 'I used to think that you were saturated with fear, but oh, I clearly had *no* idea that you were some sort of savant when it came to the depth and breadth of terror and horror and *fear* you can actually contain. Forgive me, I can't actually think straight, right now. I'm not perfect, Jack. I'm...' Pitch laughed. 'I'm about the furthest from perfect a man – or whatever I am – can be. My mind is a *junkyard*. I find I need painkillers for the headache your fears are giving me. A pity then, you can't take them as well; numb your own fears.'

Jack looked down guiltily, thinking of the times he'd thrown himself into sleep, into emptiness, the times he'd wrapped ice around his heart.

'Oh? You can?' Pitch said, hoarse. 'Let me be the first to assure you that you're not doing a very good job of it.'

Jack wanted to disappear. Pitch was angry at him. Jack thought it was probably deserved, except the weight of that anger was crushing. He focused on his breathing. He didn't want to be in the Workshop anymore.

'Jack,' Pitch said, voice smaller, less certain. 'Jack, I can't see past the fears in your head.'

'I'm sorry,' Jack said, looking up. He wondered if this was what August wanted. This mess. He started to realise that if he found his own fears invasive, intrusive, what must it be like for Pitch?

'I can't *think*...' Pitch said, pressing the heel of his palm to his forehead. 'I thought my ability to read fears had been damaged, but I think – now – it was all that scarf. And you expect me to stay here and not hunt down that creature? Not tear him apart?'

'I don't know what I expect,' Jack said. 'I don't want you to go and put yourself in danger. I put myself out on the line for you, I just want you to not...throw that away. And I think if you do what August expects you to do, that's, I mean- Can't I just have you back for a little while before you disappear again? Is that too much to ask? I-'

Jack laughed. He sounded pathetic. He sounded like everything he was and didn't *want* to be.

'Gwyn has a plan, anyway,' Jack said, and Pitch huffed out a breath of tired laughter.

'Oh, the *plan*. The one that involved putting you in a tent with August's brother? I knew something was wrong. You have kept me under a handicap since I've been recovered from the shadows! I- and Gwyn knows *better*.'

'He didn't realise how badly I've been...' Jack trailed off. He didn't want to acknowledge how bad things had been. He'd just tried to convince Pitch it was almost nothing.

'I know how his mind works,' Pitch said softly. 'I daresay he knew exactly what he was doing, he just didn't tell *you* about the part of the plan where he wanted to use what had happened to you. He was trying to convince Ash how far off the rails August had gone. Why not have one of August's victims right there, over-reacting to August's younger brother?'

'*What?*' Jack said, breath deserting him.

'What reason did he give you for the meeting?' Pitch said, straightening, eyes clearing to anger.

'He...told me he wanted me there to observe.'

'He made an error. He didn't understand that you'd react *so* poorly. But he wanted you to react. He wanted you to show signs that things were not okay. You don't understand how Gwyn's mind works, as I do.'

'But...' Jack closed his eyes. 'I thought that...I thought- Afterwards he was so *angry*.'

'You didn't give him what he wanted.'

'He didn't tell me what he wanted!' Jack said, voice rising. He shook his head rapidly, trying to clear his mind. It wasn't working. 'I don't want to argue about this.'

'No? How about we argue about something else then, since it seems to be the night for it? If Gulvi hadn't ripped your ribs apart, *when* exactly were you planning on removing that scarf?'

Jack swallowed.

‘Well?’ Pitch said, dangerously soft. ‘I’m waiting.’

‘I-’

Pitch growled and brought his hands up to his head again. He sounded dangerously off-kilter. Jack was reminded of the Nightmare King, but then – he realised – this was far more like the time when Jack had been terrified that the Man in the Moon had betrayed him, and he’d fled to Jamie’s house. Pitch had followed, but he’d been aggravated, short-tempered, in pain. He didn’t handle being overwhelmed by the fears of others very well at all.

‘The scarf is off now,’ Jack said quietly.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said into his hands. ‘It is.’

‘You shouldn’t have to deal with this on top of everything else,’ Jack said. ‘I can see it’s hurting you. It would’ve been better if the scarf had stayed on. You’re – on top of everything else, I-’

Jack broke off when Pitch lifted his head from his hands and glared at him.

North opened the door and walked into the room, light highlighting his silhouette. He looked between the two of them and then turned the overhead light on. Jack blinked at its glare. He was so used to Pitch’s room only being lit by lamps, candles or natural light, he forgot that there was an overhead source.

‘What is going on?’ North said, serious. ‘I am growing tired of all these conversations happening in my Workshop without me. I would like some answers.’

Pitch laughed brokenly.

‘You want answers?’

Dread rushed through him even as he tried to find the breath to change the subject.

‘Jack was sexually assaulted by the Each Uisge. He was traumatised so *badly* that he’s been dealing with – among other things – flashbacks ever since. And he’s been hiding it from *everyone* except Gwyn, I assume. That’s the only big secret that I know of. Did I *miss* anything? Jack?’

Jack couldn’t believe how callously Pitch had delivered the news. He took several steps sideways and curled his hand over his staff, looked out of the window, then looked at North to see how he was taking the news. When he saw how sad North looked, the fallen expression on his face, he realised he wasn’t ready to deal with this. Bad enough how they had reacted when Mora had dissolved into the dreamsand. Bad enough all of them tiptoeing around Jack when Pitch had been taken and made into the Nightmare King. This would change *everything*.

Jack hopped up onto the air and looked out the window again. He would be chased. August had a messenger network.

Jack thought he’d rather take his chances with the fae, at this point.

‘Wait,’ Pitch whispered, and Jack looked over at him, breathing coming faster. ‘I know I have no right to ask you to stay, after what I just said...after what *you* just said...’

‘What?’ North said, abruptly, realising that Pitch was picking up something from Jack that he couldn’t feel.

'I pushed too hard,' Pitch said, unable to look away from Jack's face, eyes wide and brow creased in concern.

But Jack couldn't stay. If he stayed another hour in the Workshop, he'd lose his mind.

'Make sure he doesn't go after August,' Jack said to North, and then turned around and blasted frost lightning through Pitch's window, shattering the glass. The breeze that pushed into the room was fervent and smelled of the Arctic Circle. The winds already knew where Jack wanted to go, and snow whirled around him, lifted his hair, reminded him of the days when he wasn't fettered to anyone or anything; free to do as he wanted.

He wanted to say he would come back, that he wouldn't be long, that he was sorry, but none of the words would come to his tongue. He wanted to be angry at Pitch for saying what he'd said to North, the way he'd said it. He wanted to be angry at Gwyn. He wanted to feel more than the hollow emptiness that crawled inside of him.

He ducked out through the window to the protests of Pitch and North, and shot up high into the air, calling cloud and snow to him with a single sweep of his staff.

'Get me out of here,' Jack said to the winds, and the winds obliged, picking him up and carrying him forwards, clouds and snow chasing after him as he went.

\*

Jack was so fast the clouds formed behind him, unable to keep up, a long line of snow-laden weather trailing in his wake. He let the wind turn him regularly, so he could keep an eye on his environment. The one problem about being high up in the atmosphere was that enemies could approach from any angle, but then he was better at being observant than he used to be.

Jack picked up speed, ice-crystals forming along his forearms and hands, filaments of ice growing along his staff and breaking off, before growing again. His temperature was dropping.

Time passed and he alternated between feeling hollow and as empty as the sky, then replaying all the foolish things he'd said to Pitch. It had never been easy between them, but now he didn't even know what he wanted anymore. It was obvious that at least some forms of physical affection had been ruined. They couldn't communicate well. And Jack could tell that his fears hurt Pitch, and he didn't know how to stop that.

Pitch had been about to draw him close, to offer comfort, and all Jack wanted was Pitch's warm arms around him, fingers in his hair, that measured voice rumbling through him.

Jack snarled. Pitch had offered it freely, and Jack had been the one to reject it. To reject *Pitch*.

After everything, Jack had flinched away, treated Pitch like he was the enemy.

Beneath the numbness curdled a violent, hungry hate. Jack clenched his hand harder on his staff and in the distance, a brontide sounded deep within the snow clouds he'd summoned. He wanted to be angry at Pitch for spilling his secret like that, so callously, but he was angrier at himself. It was a thick pressure behind his eyes, sat heavy in his chest.

Jack was gliding over frozen seas when he felt the presence behind him. He turned around and saw a winged fae, similar to the one that had given him chase before. One of August's messenger network no doubt.

The winged fae was heading towards him rapidly; giant falcon's wings slicing easily through the



air, a sharp, long sabre held in his hand. He was lithe and rangy, cutting through the wind with confidence, raising his sabre. Jack wondered if he meant to capture or kill him.

It didn't matter, Jack was far from the Workshop, and he couldn't simply race back this time, the fae was in the way.

He raised his staff threateningly and frost lightning blasted from it, cutting brightly through the night sky, showering them with pale blue light. The winged fae hesitated, then drove forwards, low and desperate.

Jack opened his mouth to warn the fae that he would attack, and then he remembered Gulvi laughing at him. It wasn't about warnings. This wasn't sparring. The other Guardians weren't around. Pitch wasn't going to save him.

He had to save himself.

He hovered in the air, waited. There was nowhere to run. He couldn't outpace the fae, and he was sick of being chased.

The winged fae slowed when he realised that Jack was no longer running. He curved sideways and Jack turned in the air, watching as he came closer. He couldn't read the expression on the fae's face. He watched the sword as the fae adjusted it, making sure the flat of the blade was never facing directly into the wind.

Jack banked sideways when the winged fae rushed him, then dropped through the air. He realised, too late, the mistake he'd made. The fae was a falcon shifter, pulling in his wings and stooping after Jack, gaining speed. His sabre was out and he gained speed too fast. Jack brought up his staff with both hands just in time. The sabre clashed against it, ringing out against the thin veneer of metal. Jack was grateful for the metal of Pitch's sword.

Jack somersaulted out of the way and the winged fae was after him. Jack shot frost lightning out through his staff, forcing the winged fae to shoot sideways, but even as Jack curved away, wind whistling past his ears, the fae followed. This was a creature as used to travelling the winds as Jack, if not moreso.

The hate that Jack had been feeling split into a tangle of rage, and he turned on the fae as icicles began to grow from his fingers. He was tired of being *hunted*. He just wanted space. Just an hour by himself, to breathe, and instead he was dealing with *this*. Would it never end?

'Leave me alone!' Jack shouted, and the winged fae said nothing, only drew back his sabre as he closed in on Jack. There was a firm, determined set to his face, in his tightened jaw, his narrowed bird eyes, his pursed mouth.

*Why can't you all just leave me alone?*

Jack dove down towards the ground. Blasts of frost lightning left his staff, but the winged fae was able to dodge each and every one. He closed in. The gap between them was shrinking and the sabre was getting so close that Jack could make out ornate, golden details on the hilt. The winged fae had clawed hands. Wore scraps of ragged material. Jack had never done anything to him, and yet here he was, trying to kill him or harm him or take him to August.

Jack screamed in fury and sent off blast of ice so strong that it radiated from the entire length of his staff. He turned his will towards icicles, shards of ice, slivers and fractures of the stuff. He imagined broken panes of it, wedges with edges that gleamed sharp, points tipped with wicked

brightness. It filled him with a feral, desperate need to survive, to *win*.

He heard a short, cut-off grunt. The ice died down just enough that Jack saw the damage he'd done and cried out in horror.

The winged fae had been bombarded with sharp pieces of ice; shards sticking out of his wings, his limbs. But the giant icicle had done the most damage, piercing him through the sternum. The fae stared at him in shock, wings outspread but unbalanced, akimbo. The winged fae's eyes rolled back in his head and then he was tumbling down, spiralling clumsily, the sabre falling out of his limp hand.

Jack shot down after him. The winged fae landed hard, unable to brace his fall. All around him, on the ground, sharp pieces of ice had fallen; some clear, some mottled, some opaque. Some were no larger than toothpicks. Others were like the giant icicle jutting out of the winged fae's chest.

Jack crept closer, wincing when one of the small ice splinters stabbed into his foot, before breaking off. It was only water, it would melt, but it hurt.

The winged fae followed Jack's movements with his eyes, mouth opening spasmodically, blood oozing from his mouth and pooling beneath him in the snow. His hands opened and closed, his face twisted in pain. Jack didn't get close enough to be grabbed, wished he could offer something like mercy. He worried – even now – that it could be a trap.

It wasn't a trap. The winged fae gasped his last breath, a hideous rattle emptying the last of his air out of his lungs. He stared fixedly through Jack, eyes damning, fingers and toes clenched in pain. Jack noticed that the creature had gone bare foot like he had. He couldn't help but notice the poor state of his clothing. He was bleeding from at least twenty places.

Jack gasped weakly, then repeated the sound, clutching at his chest.

He looked up to the sky to see if anyone else was following, but no one was.

Jack crept forwards and touched tentative fingertips to the brow of the fae. His forehead was still hot. His hair was not quite hair, but sharp feather filaments.

He'd killed a fae. Not some human bent on murdering a child, but a *fae* who seemed bent on murdering *him*. He wanted to exit the vicious cycle of hunter and hunted he'd found himself in. This wasn't the answer. He didn't feel unfettered, boundless, free.

Jack leapt into the air with a cry and let the wind take him deeper into the Arctic Circle, until finally there was nothing but howling, excoriating winds, hard-packed snow and the salt-cold scent of sea ice.

He flew straight into the snow, forcing it to part for him as he entered. He flew through the outer layers and hit the inside hard. He waved his staff behind him, causing more of it to creep over the gap he'd made, until finally he was ensconced in a cold darkness that muffled the wind. He heard nothing but the sound of his own breathing, his clothing shifting against the ice. Jack made more room for himself with his staff, and then mentally willed a storm to form overhead. Something that would bring more snow, bury him deep, leave him as nothing more than a part of a snow drift.

He didn't want to go back to the Workshop.

He didn't want to go anywhere.

He'd murdered someone. And worse, he hadn't even known exactly what he was doing when he

was doing it. His powers were out of control. Sure, he'd wanted the winged fae to stop, he knew that he'd have to harm the guy, but...kill him? Like *that*? Jack closed his eyes and buried his head in his arms when he realised how easily it came to him. How quickly the darkness flashed up inside of him.

He wondered if the shadows that had touched him – both at the gymnasium and when they'd rescued Pitch – had changed him somehow. But a small part of him knew it wasn't true. He'd felt glimpses of the darkness ever since the Nain Rouge had sucked out part of his power. Ever since he'd had to live with a terrible rift in his spirit that he thought would never be filled or healed again.

The rift in his powers had healed, the darkness was still there.

Jack clenched his fist and heard the crunch of ice particles on his skin. He rubbed them off and shook his head, wanting – strangely – warmth. A gentle, soothing warmth.

He closed his eyes, shuddered out a huge breath, pressing his back to the snow and sensing it falling above him, burying him deeper and deeper. It gave him the illusion of being alone. He thought he wanted that, but the more he felt it, the more he realised that he didn't know what he wanted. He couldn't turn back the clock, couldn't unsay the things he'd said to Pitch.

'I just can't win,' he said, quietly. But hearing himself say the words, muffled by the snow and ice around him, made him laugh.

He'd just technically won, after all.

But that wasn't a fight he wanted to be a part of in the first place.

Time passed. He let his thoughts drift into nothingness. He was empty winter winds and the promise of hypothermia with no shelter in sight. It didn't feel bad, because it didn't feel like anything at all. He surrendered to it. Ice swirled over his skin in random patterns, fell away, swirled again. His hair stiffened with ice and then became pliant again. The ice rose and fell in him, a cyclical promise. Had this always been inside of him?

*Probably, Jack realised foggily, blinking himself out of his trance. Some of this isn't new. Just...the strength of it. The strength of it all, that's what's new.*

He had to go back. He'd been travelling for some time through the air, and it clearly wasn't safe anywhere. He missed aspects of the Workshop. The smell of spices and paints and enamels in the air. The strange mix of pine and other cool, pungent scents. The taste of cinnamon and nutmeg in the back of his mouth when he entered the kitchens. How Pitch's old room always felt warm even though that couldn't possibly be true.

He had to go back.

He had to tell them what he'd done.

He'd killed someone.

How would he ever be safe around children again with powers like that?

Jack winced and used his staff to command the snow to release him from its grip. He was tired as he jumped onto the winds again. Tired as he raced back to the Workshop, letting the wind do most of the work for him. He zoomed through the clouds he'd left behind him. No one bothered him. The cloud provided good, dense cover.

The final scenes of his encounter with the winged fae played through his mind. He knew he'd had no choice, but remorse flowed through him. Who had he been? What had his name been? How did he have a sabre that looked like a precious antique, while wearing clothing that looked unkempt and uncared for?

Jack shook his head to clear it, and surprisingly it worked. So much had happened over the past few hours that his mind couldn't contain it anymore. He had spilled his thoughts out until he was as vast and timeless as the night sky and the stars above him.

\*

His bed was soft but the mattress and fabric felt alien as he crawled onto it. He leaned his staff against the wall and then held his hands out to Mora. She had waited for him; agitated and uneasy.

She laid her warm, velvety head in his hands, then stepped closer so she could hook her chin over Jack's shoulder and breathe down his back. Fear rose within him, but it was almost negligible. He remembered when Mora's ability to cause fear within him was a problem, but not anymore. He'd desensitised. He felt too much now for the fear Mora inspired to bother him.

She was warmth against him, eyes glowing benevolently, ears forward, attentive. Jack leaned into her, she leaned into him, until his weight was against hers and he would fall if she disappeared.

'I missed you,' Jack said softly. Mora huffed out through her nostrils. Jack wished he could understand her, but sometimes he was pretty sure he got the gist of what she was saying. The huff sounded a lot like, '*Of course.*'

He stroked his fingers down both sides of her neck, occasionally grasping wisps of her shadowy mane and letting them curl around his wrists. Mora didn't remind him as much of Augus in his waterhorse form anymore, and Jack was grateful for that. She was just so *different*.

He let frost gently curl down Mora's body, until even her hooves were frosted with pale, gleaming ice. She didn't mind, she had never been bothered by the patterns he made upon her.

After a while, she stepped back, nudged him gently in the chest. Jack winced, his ribs still didn't feel quite right, though they were definitely whole. He supposed Pitch was still figuring out the golden light. That had been his first healing he'd performed since having the living shadows removed.

'You sticking around tonight? Or heading out?'

In response to that, Mora walked into the corner of his room and whickered softly. She exhaled sleepily and then lowered her head, lipping playfully at the small coffee table that Jack didn't use. Clearly she was staying in.

He missed sleeping with her in trees. He didn't dare daydream about a day when they could do that again, but it was in the back of his mind; something he'd like to do.

Jack sat down on his bed, his back to the wall, knees up to his chest and an arm resting on top of his bent legs.

He'd killed someone.

Not more than a few hours after being filled with a desire to destroy Ash or Gulvi, he'd actually killed someone.

He knew it was self-defence, but the spill of his powers disturbed him. How was he supposed to get them under control? Jack shifted until he was lying down on his side, hugging his knees to his chest.

He wanted to sleep, but it eluded him. Instead, he worried that even now, after everything, Pitch would think that he was weak, that he hadn't fought back hard enough against August. He'd tried so hard, *so hard*, but those compulsions were impossible to resist. How did the others do it? Why was he so susceptible to that sort of magic?

Jack worried that he could have tried harder. Should have been more aware in the first place. Pitch's words about how he never feared August as much as he should came back to haunt him, played over and over again in his mind.

Jack blinked when he heard a quiet knock on the door. He pushed himself upright and realised that he was once again sitting in the dark.

The door opened a crack and Pitch peered in. Jack's heart picked up, just to see him.

'May I come in?' Pitch asked, and Jack nodded, knowing that Pitch could see him easily with his night vision.

Pitch walked in, holding a plate piled with what looked like cookies. Jack smelled the cinnamon and felt a small ping of warmth. Pitch walked over and set the plate down on the bed, then sat on the corner of it, close to Jack, but far enough away that Jack didn't feel crowded. The light from outside picked out more signs of the lunar alphabet embroidery on Pitch's robes. In fact – Jack realised – there was more now than there had been earlier in the day. A great deal more. It was silvery and well-wrought, a robust but beautiful language, replete with symbols and patterns.

'Your embroidery is coming back,' Jack said, and Pitch nodded. He picked up a small candy cane from the edge of the plate and pushed it towards Jack, before picking up a cinnamon cookie and taking a small, conservative bite.

'I should not have so flippantly betrayed your secret to North like that,' Pitch said, setting down the cookie and folding his arms. Jack turned the candy cane over in his fingers and then placed it on the windowsill for later. He wasn't hungry.

'Yeah, well,' Jack said.

'I am sorry,' Pitch added, and Jack laughed darkly.

'Yeah, you have an excuse though. 'Formerly possessed by the root of all evil up until pretty recently, still adjusting to everyday life.' And then there's me, reminding you of your daughter, no excuses at all.'

Pitch stilled, then sighed.

'You were trying to save my life the first time. Yours, the second.'

'Look at me and tell me it doesn't make you angry,' Jack said, and Pitch shook his head.

'I can't. It makes me *furious*. However, I am *also* able to accept that you had valid reasons – not excuses – *reasons*. I am trying to find a place for those actions in my mind. It will take time.'

Jack's heart ached. He had wanted to protect Seraphina's memory. He knew how special that locket was. And instead – twice now – he'd forced her into Pitch's thoughts as a way of

manipulating a desired outcome. He hadn't known he was capable of that.

Pitch picked up the rest of his cookie and finished it in thoughtful silence. Jack watched him, hungry for the small details. It was such a novelty to see Pitch doing these things; brushing crumbs off his robe, turning the cookie as though looking for the best angle to take his next bite, chewing fastidiously and brushing at his lips after he was done.

Jack blinked hard when he realised that he wanted to be able to do that, wanted to be able to brush at his lips, touch his face. *Something*.

He felt so much distance between them both, even now.

'I said some really embarrassing things earlier,' Jack said, laughing nervously.

'Did you?'

'I-'

'They sounded very honest to me. Perhaps the most authentic words you've spoken to me since I've returned. And you were right.'

'What?' Jack said.

Pitch pushed the plate to the side and moved closer, pausing as though checking it was okay. After a while, Pitch reached out with his hand and placed it on the outer curve of Jack's ankle. His warmth was a sear of heat across his skin, and Jack closed his eyes briefly, feeling each of Pitch's fingers resting delicately against him.

'How long I spent, telling you that I wouldn't go anywhere. What a cruel thing that must have been for you when I was taken.'

Jack opened his eyes and stared into the shadows in the corner of the room, heart beating quickly. He felt exposed, a raw nerve. He waited, didn't know what to say.

'You saved me, Jack,' Pitch said, a note of awe and wonder creeping into his voice. 'When I- I barely remember turning to you, but when I begged it of you, I didn't think I'd ever see you again. Not as myself. You saved me. And,' Pitch laughed incredulously, 'not only that, you managed to decipher a way to destroy the Nightmare Men permanently, based on a single shaft of golden light. Oh, how we could have used you, back during the Golden Age.'

Jack turned and stared at Pitch, hungry to hear more. To hear him talking in that measured, wistful way.

'I didn't think I'd see you again,' Pitch said, and Jack pushed himself further upright on the bed.

'Way to show some faith, Pitch. You *asked* me after all,' Jack said, a teasing note in his words.

'But I didn't save you,' Pitch said, and Jack swallowed. 'And I didn't save you from a great deal, it seems.'

'Please don't make a big deal out of it,' Jack whispered, and Pitch squeezed his ankle, gently.

'I am making no more of it than it actually is,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

'My fears have always been way out of proportion to what is-'

‘No, they have not,’ Pitch said, turning so that he faced Jack fully. ‘Some, perhaps. But overall? *No*. But I did not come in here to argue about these things, tonight. That is ground we shall tread over soon enough. I actually came to ask you something, if I may?’

‘You’re all polite, tonight,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

‘Between North’s lecture on the importance of keeping secrets that he had almost *completely* figured out for himself anyway, your flood of fears that has given me the most *unrelenting* headache, and the fact that I think I shall still be scrubbing your blood out from under my fingernails tomorrow morning and for the rest of the week; perhaps a polite mood has just taken my fancy.’

‘Ah. Okay,’ Jack said, and then he exhaled slowly when Pitch squeezed reassuringly at his ankle. Small flutters of fear moved through him at the touch, the gentleness of it, but he was able to hold back the clotted mass of terror that lurked deep within. His ankle seemed to be a safe zone. He wondered if Pitch knew that. Wondered if – even now – Pitch was keeping a close monitor of his fears.

‘My point, Jack: I’m confident in your ability to save yourself, given enough time. But if you would like someone along for the ride, so to speak...’

Jack sat up properly when he realised what Pitch was asking. He kept his legs outstretched, so that Pitch didn’t have to remove his hand. Pitch lifted both of his own legs up onto the mattress and maintained steady eye contact.

‘I’m a mess,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

‘You’ve always been a mess. I’m not sure if you recall, but that is something we share in common. Our club of two, remember?’

Jack’s heart pounded painfully.

‘I’m kind of more of a mess than I was before.’

‘Again, you are preaching to the choir,’ Pitch said, with a warmth in his voice that wrapped around Jack like a visceral touch.

Jack shivered and moved his legs away from Pitch, crossed them and frowned.

‘How much do you know?’ Jack said, and Pitch breathed in on a sharp inhale, knowing exactly what Jack was asking.

‘Enough,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t think we should talk about this right now.’

‘Why?’ Jack said, and Pitch sighed.

‘Because it’s a fine line between sitting here and talking with you, and hunting someone down to show them exactly what sort of training I received as a golden warrior, and how much of the Nightmare King is left over inside of me.’

Jack’s mouth went dry. A coil of fear spread through him. Pitch couldn’t go. It was too dangerous.

‘There, *that* is why,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘You don’t want me to leave. I would prefer to stay until I know of the plan to deal with him.’

Jack looked down at his hands, and then folded his arms as well.

‘Jack, though I doubt you will believe me – it wasn’t your fault.’

Jack laughed and shook his head. He had thought that – upon hearing it – a weight would be lifted off his shoulders. Instead he just wanted to argue about how Pitch hadn’t been there, and couldn’t possibly know.

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘No, time does a much better job of eroding these things than words can; I believe I’ve said that to you before. But it bears saying.’

Things had become uncomfortable between them again. Jack picked up the candy cane and turned it in his fingers. He realised, then, that Pitch must have made a note when he’d seen Jack eating one the other day. It was the first time Pitch had ever brought him something to eat. Pitch picked up another cookie and ate it, apparently lost deep in thought.

Jack had thought, briefly, that they were talking like they used to talk. But a lot of subjects were out of bounds. Things were still uncomfortable. And Jack wondered just how much anger Pitch had lurking inside of him. At August, at himself, at Jack for using Seraphina like that. Still, Jack could feel the outline of Pitch’s hand on his ankle. He wanted to be closer, he didn’t know how to go about it. What if he initiated something and then was flooded with fear? It would be wrong to get Pitch’s hopes up like that.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, brushing more crumbs off his robe and then dusting off his fingers. ‘I’m going to be blunt. You know me well enough by now to know that I prefer to be forthright. Did you want us to be intimate again?’

Jack shifted on the bed.

‘I want it to be like it was,’ Jack said. ‘So...yeah?’

‘Oh, Jack. You weren’t even thinking that far ahead, were you?’ Pitch said, almost to himself. Jack narrowed his eyes in confusion, and Pitch scooted closer, until Jack could feel the warmth radiating through his robe.

‘Intimacy would have meant I’d find the scarf. Did you even consider that?’

Pitch reached out and ran a cautious palm down Jack’s arm, and Jack flinched before he could stop himself. Pitch paused, and then continued the motion, before letting his hand rest by the bed, close to Jack’s arm.

‘I killed someone,’ Jack blurted out, hands tightening around himself.

‘I know,’ Pitch said, and Jack stared at him.

‘What?’

‘You’re afraid of how we’ll react,’ Pitch said. ‘I knew before I came in.’

Jack realised he probably shouldn’t have been so surprised. Some time ago, Pitch had gotten to the point where he could read the nuances of Jack’s fears from some distance. With the scarf gone, Pitch seemed to be on the ball with Jack’s fears again. Jack realised that the scarf had really muddled up Pitch’s fear-reading abilities, that it had held him back from using one of his primary



senses. He didn't know it would have so much impact.

'It was self-defence. It's not the first time someone's come after me once I've left the protective ward,' Jack said, and then rubbed a hand over his face. 'It was- He was going to kill me. But, I mean, he didn't look like he had good clothing. Maybe he didn't have a choice. And then I just, I mean- If I hadn't left in the first place, he'd still be alive.'

'Yes. And if August hadn't recruited him, he'd still be alive,' Pitch said evenly. 'You needed to leave. Your fears become rather loud and specific when you feel so trapped. You wouldn't have been able to stay without hurting yourself.'

Jack sighed. There was so much familiar acceptance in that one sentence. Jack rested his head in his hands and looked sideways up into those pale, golden eyes.

'I'm not made for this kind of thing. I wasn't chosen to be a golden warrior, or born for it, or whatever. But that's not actually my main problem with the whole thing. I just lost control. The power is right *there*, at the moment, underneath the surface. I just think about it, and it's crazy. It's-

'You don't have your fun to temper it anymore,' Pitch said, and Jack laughed.

'And I got hit with a giant beam of focused golden light, which apparently twisted it out of all recognition. Look, it's not about the fun-'

'It is, partly,' Pitch insisted. 'You were always exceedingly powerful. Anyone who met you before the Nain Rouge attacked you, who had the slightest knowledge of supernatural powers, would have known that you had an excess of ice and – to steal North's lazy term – 'magic' at your disposal. But you directed it playfully, constantly. Now you don't exercise it often at all, and when you do, it is in bursts designed to further your aims, whatever they may be at the time. Instead of being spread over snow days across the world, it's focused. Yes, of course your powers are stronger now, but the way you use them has changed.'

Pitch paused and then huffed out a small breath of laughter.

'I saw what you did at the meeting, what you were like up in the sky. You are *dangerous*.'

'Tell me about it,' Jack said. 'There's a body in the Arctic Circle proving it.'

Jack lowered his head onto his hands and groaned in frustration.

'I don't know what I'm doing,' Jack said. 'I used to kinda know. I'd make snow days. I'd sail on the winds. I'd annoy people. I was a shit. I'd help kids have fun. I just- Even when Mora came along, I still *knew* what I was doing. I was just strangely doing it with a Nightmare who seemed to enjoy all the things that I did.'

'Jamie's death affected you profoundly. The first time you visited me, I could- It was very present.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, scowling. 'You used it against me.'

'I was not in a particularly pleasant mood,' Pitch said, and Jack's mouth curved on a half-smile.

His smile disappeared again when he realised how close he was to Pitch, yet he couldn't do anything about it. His arms wouldn't unlock, he didn't know how to reach out. And Pitch wasn't reaching back.

‘Will you take my hand?’ Pitch said, turning his hand so that it rested, palm up, on the bed. ‘You were able to do that earlier.’

Jack realised Pitch was talking about the time he’d woken up from the nightmare. He looked down and then swallowed. There was nothing organic about this. It was stilted, required permissions. But if it was the only way, then...

Jack licked at his dry lips and then nervously lowered his hand until it was over Pitch’s palm. He curled his fingers around Pitch’s hand, felt a buzz of sensation when Pitch’s hand shifted minutely between his, fingers pressing back.

Pitch made a pained, thick sound in the back of his throat, and Jack’s eyes shot up, stared at him. But Pitch was looking down at their hands. Jack couldn’t see his face.

‘You were already *so* afraid of these things,’ Pitch said, breathing audibly. After a minute, his breathing was under control once more, and Jack petted at Pitch’s hand anxiously, uncertain what was going on, what Pitch was feeling. Jack wanted to make everything okay again, but he didn’t know how.

‘He knew exactly what he was doing,’ Pitch said darkly, and Jack startled, his hand shot off Pitch’s hand.

‘How much do you know?’ Jack said, voice high and shaky. ‘How much?’

‘Some of your fears are vague, but some are...specific,’ Pitch said. ‘And flashbacks come through differently to regular fears. They were so easy for me – the Nightmare King – to exploit in others, because they reveal *more*. I don’t think we should be talking about this right now. You’re tired. You’ve had a very, very long evening.’

Jack trembled, helpless.

‘Will you lower your hand again?’ Pitch said, his voice soothing. ‘It’s a short distance back to my hand. I’m not going to hurt you.’

Jack forced himself to concentrate. He lowered his hand and then settled it, as lightly as possible, on Pitch’s skin. He felt over-sensitive, like any extra stimulus would send him running, but Pitch didn’t do anything. His hand didn’t move, he didn’t say anything, didn’t apply pressure. A minute passed, another, and Jack shuddered out an exhale and Pitch sighed with him, as though he’d also been holding his breath.

‘I’m sorry about...this,’ Jack said, and Pitch shook his head. They exchanged eye contact until Jack had to look away, embarrassed.

‘It’s okay, Jack. You’re doing well.’

‘Don’t patronise me,’ Jack snapped, and Pitch’s hand did shift under his then. Fingers curled up and around the back of his hand, stroking twice.

‘Perhaps you haven’t *met* me before,’ Pitch drawled, ‘I’m the former Nightmare King, I don’t give a damn about condescending to you. At least, not right *now*. I do, however, want to be close to you. If this is all I can have, then this is all I shall have. I know how hard you’re trying.’

‘Is it giving you a headache?’ Jack said.

‘Your fears? No, not at this moment. And you? How are you feeling? How are your ribs?’

‘Weird. Bendy. Is that normal?’

Pitch nodded. Jack stroked his fingers across Pitch’s palm, and Pitch inhaled slowly. Jack repeated the gesture. He couldn’t believe what was happening. He was almost afraid he’d wake up in an hour and this would all be a dream. Maybe he’d still be in the Arctic, holed up in the snow, wishing for everything – including himself – to disappear.

‘Reconstructing bone is not a perfect art. The ribs are whole, but they need to properly ossify. Until then, they will be unusually flexible to prevent further breaking. And, for future reference, I don’t *ever* want to have to do that again. I’m afraid I strongly object to you chasing swan-maidens. You could have died.’

‘Tell me about it. The dying part felt really familiar,’ Jack said, and Pitch’s hand clenched hard around his. Jack froze, blinked. Immediately Pitch relaxed his grip.

‘Familiar,’ Pitch said faintly. ‘If you had died...’

‘But I didn’t,’ Jack said quickly.

‘If you *had*,’ Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

‘But I *didn’t*.’

‘Will you stop putting your life in danger?’ Pitch hissed suddenly. ‘North says I shouldn’t put myself under undue stress. I told him we’d need to put you in a lead-lined box and sink you deep under the ground for that to happen.’

‘Geez, calm down,’ Jack said, but he felt like laughing.

Jack squeezed at Pitch’s hand and then wanted, more than anything, to close the distance between them. To press his lips to Pitch’s. Just once, just gently. A reminder that what they had wasn’t gone, that it could recover.

Helplessly, he leaned forwards, and then stopped about a foot away from Pitch’s face, a strange coil of fear stretching through him.

‘I want to,’ Jack whispered, and Pitch closed his eyes.

‘You will.’

‘Will I?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Just not now.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘If you still want to, then yes,’ Pitch said, and he opened his eyes again. ‘When I told you that I wasn’t going anywhere, I made the cardinal mistake of assuming that my feelings for you were strong enough to withstand *anything*. I was – perhaps – telling you how I felt more than I was stating logical fact; not that it makes it okay. Nothing stays the same. But sometimes Jack, that is a comfort too. This – what you’re experiencing – will not be static. It may get worse before it gets better, but it will not stay the same. We’ll deal with it as it comes.’

‘Together?’ Jack said, stroking at Pitch’s palm nervously.

‘Together.’

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'A Surfeit of Nightmares,' things go back to progressing not so smoothly between Jack and Pitch. Jack finds out Gwyn's true motives for having Jack at that meeting, and then ends up getting some surprisingly good advice from the King of the Seelie Fae.

# A Surfeit of Nightmares

## Chapter Notes

dkasjfdsalk THANK YOU ALL for your bookmarks, subscriptions and lovely freaking comments. I wish I could reply to them sooner, but I usually try and get around to them all on the day I post a new chapter (so now!)

You guys rock my socks.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The nightmare stole over him, terribly familiar.

It was a dream he'd had since long before he met the Guardians. It was a nightmare that was no more than reality, revised. In it, he was making snowballs for children, laughing with them, and then he'd feel the sickening dread that resulted when they ran through him. He would move from street to street, field to field; everywhere it would be the same. In the dream, he could pass through one hundred different locations, and hundreds of children would move through him.

He was, he always would be, invisible.

The dream was so familiar that instead of fresh horror, it seeded a tired despair. It wound through him like vines, stuck to his skin.

Once, he overheard a teenager telling her boyfriend – as they leaned on an old, rusty Buick as snow fell – that a person was not only their own perceptions, but how others perceived them. The boyfriend had laughed, made a joke, and Jack had pressed a hand to his heart and hoped it wasn't true. If a person was not only their perceptions, but also how others perceived them, then he truly was a ghost.

The nightmare made him insubstantial. Children having the time of their lives ran through him. Shrieking laughter followed his heartbreak.

The nightmare shifted and changed so that Jack was invisible to the Guardians too. This – too – was not so unfamiliar, though it hurt more. It left a needling pain in his chest, made it hard to breathe. He didn't push the children to believe in him, but he couldn't let go of the Guardians. He followed them, begging and pleading, voice cracking on a breaking hope.

When Pitch turned up, Jack's heart leapt. The wave of relief was so powerful that he almost staggered as it hit him.

Then Pitch walked through him.

Jack fell to his knees, turned to watch him walk up to North, talking about composers Jack didn't know. He clung to his staff, looked for Mora, but she wasn't there.

Then the wind blew straight through him, no longer heeding his calls to escape. He was rooted to the ground, mouth open, dragging in breath after breath.

No one could see him.

‘Dear boy,’ a soft, polite voice behind him. ‘I can see you just fine.’

Jack shrieked and turned. August crouched behind him, a smirk touched the corners of his lips, a cruel glow in his green eyes. Jack pushed himself upright, tried to fly away, but the wind only echoed through his body. Jack became aware that it was a nightmare, clawed for wakefulness, couldn’t *find* it.

August stood up and followed as Jack backed up. He brushed long, dripping hair away from his face and tucked it behind his ears. He offered a half-smile that would have looked charming on anyone else, but inspired nothing but terror in Jack.

‘I imagine this is quite the nightmare for you, right now, isn’t it, Jack? This one will be easy. Shh, shh, dear boy, it’s okay now. I’m here. I’m here.’

Jack’s throat closed as memory entwined stickily with nightmare, and words that he’d heard before sending tendrils of nausea through him. He continued to back up, gasped as he passed straight through Pitch. Jack tried to reach out, tried to close his fingers on the material of Pitch’s robe. It passed through his skin.

August chuckled.

‘Do you know what I think? I think this shows just how weak you are, Jack Frost. Small, weak, thin, frail. Just a pawn, really.’

Jack hit the wall, his hands reached out and scrabbled against it, looking for a way out. That was when he realised he no longer had his staff.

August came closer, somehow growing larger in appearance as he approached. Jack shrieked for help, but he was invisible. No one would listen. It was just he and August, and he was trapped. He was always *trapped*.

‘Relax, little thing,’ August whispered, and Jack whimpered.

He’d heard all of this before.

This was *real*.

He closed his mouth around a name. Refused to utter it. Because he’d uttered it once before and it didn’t do anything except stop him from giving into a compulsion. He’d screamed the name and no one had come. It was a name that was supposed to break a spell, supposed to snap the curse that had fallen over him.

But when August feathered careful fingers through Jack’s hair, the name burst forth anyway.

‘*PITCH!*’

Warm fingers curled hot over his shoulder and Jack shouted awake, pushing hard at what grasped him. He gasped for breath, looked wildly around the room. It was morning. Mora was leaning forwards in that way she did when she fed on his nightmares.

Pitch stared down, horrified. Eyes wide, pupils blown.

‘Oh god,’ Jack couldn’t concentrate. ‘Oh god, it’s you. It’s just you.’

Jack pressed a hand to his chest and tried to get his breathing under control.

'I'm starting to question the wisdom of me moving back down to the room next to yours,' Pitch said, also breathless. Jack blinked at him, confused.

'You moved?'

'How long have you been having nightmares like *this*?' Jack heard the faint thread of anger, of outrage in Pitch's voice.

'You've seen me have nightmares before,' Jack said, wincing as he said it. He swung his feet off the side of the bed and then bent double. His chest ached. His sternum felt bruised. It had always felt bruised after children had walked through him. Even now, he didn't feel entirely visible, except that he could still feel the imprint of Pitch's fingers through his sweatshirt. Had he shouted out loud? Had Pitch heard him?

Jack sighed out a breath. Pitch would have heard him anyway. He could read Jack's fears again.

Jack could still feel the ghost of August's hand in his hair, and he reached up with his fingers and scraped at his scalp to try and reset the sensation. It worked, a little, and Jack hiccupped in relief through the shudders of his uneven breathing.

'You know perfectly well that this is closer to one of Mora's feeding frenzies, than it is to your regular nightmares. Except that she *isn't* in a feeding frenzy, she didn't even cause this!'

Jack shook his head, frustration a shift and blaze inside of him.

'It's *nothing*,' he said, angry again.

'Mora is positively fat, so I know you don't *need* to feed her,' Pitch said, sounding just as annoyed. 'Is this what you've been going through? *This*? And no one knows?'

'*You* know,' Jack said, pushing himself up from the bed and glaring at him. A part of him tried to tell himself to calm down, to be nicer, that a short time ago he and Pitch had been holding hands and it had been *good*. But...there was too much between them still, too much Pitch didn't understand, too much that Jack didn't want to talk about. It angered him, seeing Pitch in his room. Not so long ago, he had screamed for Pitch as wildly and desperately as possible, and Pitch hadn't been there.

No one had come.

He might as well have been invisible.

Something snapped inside of him, a hollow crack that was a jagged rip down his spine.

'Am I afraid enough of him *now*? Yeah, Pitch? You think that I've managed it? You think that I've managed to actually be as scared of him as you wanted me to be?' The words came out in a sharp, pained rush.

Pitch flinched as though he'd been struck.

'I didn't want *this*,' Pitch said, and Jack laughed.

'But you wanted me more afraid, because you knew something like this could happen, didn't you? What was it you said? 'The Nain Rouge would kill me quickly. And Au- *he* would take his time?''

Jack hated that he still couldn't say his name in situations like this. Talking with Gwyn, discussing

strategy, it was getting easier. Now, hearing August's words rattling around his mind, feeling those teeth sinking into his side again, he couldn't.

'Jack, you've just had a nightmare,' Pitch said, a sympathy present that felt like sandpaper on Jack's skin. When Pitch took a step forward; a gentle, reassuring step, Jack glared at him.

'I don't want your comfort!' Jack shouted.

'What do you want?' Pitch said, evenly.

'I want it to not have happened at all! Can you do that? Can you undo it for me? *No*. You can't.'

Pitch took another step forwards, his face settling into something darker and foreboding.

'This is an awful lot of fuss for something that you keep insisting is nothing.'

Jack swore that one day he was going to grind his teeth together so hard that Toothiana was going to yell at him for it. He knew what Pitch was angling at, knew what Pitch wanted him to say, and would be damned before he'd say it.

'Get out,' Jack said, and Pitch frowned.

'You were calling for me,' he said.

'I'm not now, am I? Get out. I don't want to talk about this. I don't want to talk about anything!'

Pitch's mouth tightened, but instead of looking angry, he looked considering. He narrowed his eyes at Jack, and then after a moment, nodded once, briefly, and turned to leave.

Almost at once, confusingly, Jack's heart stuttered in fear. He didn't want Pitch to go. He had spent so much time trying to bring him back. He wanted to spend *time* with him. And yet, he couldn't right now, it was a suffocating weight on his lungs. He didn't want to be around *anyone*.

But...

Pitch paused with his hand on the doorknob and looked back, something sad moving in the cast of his brows.

'Jack, it's normal,' he said quietly. 'It's okay to want some space. I'm not going any-'

Pitch's eyes widened, he made a stricken noise in the back of his throat, one that Jack felt like he could have uttered himself. He wanted to take that phrase and tear it apart. Hearing Pitch almost utter it again, knowing that it hadn't been true all those other times, filled him with a fresh sense of betrayal.

'Forgive me,' Pitch said, frowning. 'This isn't easy for me either. I'll come and check on you later, Jack.'

'You will?' Jack said hoarsely. Later might be good. Perhaps he could handle this later.

'Of course,' Pitch said, and closed the door behind him as he exited.

Jack sank back down to his bed and noticed his breathing was wild and out of control again. Mora, wisely, hung back and gave him the space that he didn't want, but needed anyway.

\*



It was North who found Jack next. At mid-morning, he discovered Jack pilfering the last of the candy canes from the storage room that held countless Christmas trees. He was running out. He didn't know how to put a request to the elves or the yeti for more (probably not the elves, who couldn't really be trusted in the kitchens, and could only barely be trusted to deliver the food itself). After all, the yeti still hadn't entirely forgiven him for icing up one whole side of the Workshop, and though a few were slowly coming around to him once more, he was mostly dealing with a whole lot of suspicious looks again.

Jack tried to hide the candy canes behind his back when North entered, but North beamed and waved a hand in the air.

'We are making you more, Jack,' North said, and then sat down on an old, dry Yule log that had never been placed in a fireplace. He flicked his fingers at the Christmas tree, and all of the small lights flared to life.

'Are we going to have a talk now?' Jack said, 'About it?'

'About what happened to you?' North said. 'Are you wanting to have a talk about it?'

Jack sighed and shook his head. Sometimes he wanted to talk about bits of it, just small pieces of it. Sometimes he wanted to forget anything had ever happened. What he wanted to do changed from minute to minute, hour to hour.

'I am so *sorry*, Jack,' North said, and Jack looked up into those blue eyes, the fierce set of North's dark brows.

'Isn't this talking about it?' Jack said, and North shook his head.

'Not quite. This is something I am talking about. You are free to not listen to me, but I am having some things I want to say. I will make it quick. I promise.'

Jack wanted to leave, but he also wanted to know what North had to say. After a brief internal battle with himself, he decided he would wait it out. Things had been going better between he and North lately. He was far less pushy than he used to be.

'You are staying? Marvellous!' North enthused. 'This is what I am wanting to say: I cannot pretend to understand what it has been like for you, Jack. Not only recent events, but also the centuries before when you were alone. I am only knowing the sides of you that you let me see, and I am only understanding little bits. But what I understand of you, gives me feeling that I have to explain something to you. You didn't do anything wrong, Jack. Not even a *little*.'

Jack accidentally snapped one of the candy canes that he was holding.

'I missed something I shouldn't have missed,' Jack said, thinking back to how he'd flown over that non-frozen pond, how he should have *seen*-

'If you missed something, Jack, it is because you had been through so much already. What I saw of you, after Pitch was possessed once more- It was a miracle you were able to be doing as much as you did.'

'This is suspiciously a lot like *talking about it*,' Jack said, and North nodded and shrugged in mild apology.

'Pitch is angry with us,' North said, and Jack frowned.

‘Why?’

‘Because we did not do a better job of looking after you, in his absence.’

Jack shook his head in disbelief. Pitch didn’t know what he was talking about. Jack still remembered how terribly tender North had been, immediately after the Nightmare King had taken Pitch’s place in the gymnasium. How he had gently stroked Jack’s palm open, where he’d been cutting himself on Pitch’s locket. How he’d made sure Jack could stand, fought for him when Gwyn wanted to take him to the Seelie Court, always accepted Jack, even when Jack was mired in secrets and half-truths about what he was doing.

‘He is still not entirely stable,’ North continued.

‘Really? But...’

‘He’s trying very hard for you,’ North said, ‘But the fact that he has to try so hard, is a sign that there is instability beneath. If you were not here, I think he would be less stable.’

*And I pushed him away, this morning. I keep forgetting that he might need me too. Though how could I be good for him anymore? Being exposed to all of that fear can’t be good for him.*

‘You seem to have really come around with him,’ Jack said, and North’s lips tipped up in a smile.

‘You did not see how furious he was when Mora was taken by Sandy’s dreamsand. Ah, and there are other things I have been seeing, with him. It is not so hard, now, to care for him. He is simply not who he was. This is clear. I think you know that too.’

‘I do,’ Jack said. ‘How come you’re so okay with me wearing Makara’s scarf, and Pitch isn’t?’

‘Because, Jack, it has hurt him deeply to think that you couldn’t trust him with this.’

‘But it wasn’t personal,’ Jack said in a rush, ‘It-’

‘Also,’ North said, holding up a finger, ‘it simply *hurts* him. You cannot escape this fact. I am...lucky, perhaps, that I can keep my own emotions in a way that is – I hope – safe for you. But Pitch is unstable, he does not have the self-control or self-possession he had before he was taken by the shadows. And even before- You can tell much from a man that seeks to be in control of himself so desperately, who must think *always* before he acts and speaks, who leans hard towards fire and passion when he forgets to take the measure of his own self-control.’

Jack frowned, turning it over. He had always thought of Pitch as a remarkably self-possessed man, someone who was wise and even – at times – detached. But North made it sound like Pitch was the opposite, hanging onto self-control as a way of...what? Dealing with things?

‘He has his own grief, in this, Jack,’ North said soberly. ‘We all do. We have all lost something. And we have all lost something because of this war.’

‘Can I ask...what you lost?’ Jack said, and North closed his eyes.

‘Many things, Jack,’ North said. ‘Some are being obvious. At the gymnasium, I lost...I am not entirely sure yet, I am still looking for it. Faith, I am thinking. Faith that if we band together and just try *hard* enough, we can protect children and save each other. But it was not to be, that day. To throw our *all* at something, to be fierce and strong and true, and still have the bad guys- Ah. Well. This I am still thinking about. I talk with Sandy about it sometimes.

‘And, Jack, I lost the ability to tell myself that I had done my best with you. I am learning that this is simply not so. I cannot change the past, but in this I have been trying to offer a different present, and I think this is working, no?’ North offered a tentative smile. ‘And I grieve, Jack, for what you have lost. I grieve for Bunnymund, who is carrying many heavy burdens and trying to find his way through them all. For Sandy, who was heartbroken when he dissolved Mora, and still – I think – has not forgiven himself for this mistake. And for Toothiana, who finds it so hard to be separated from us in this way; not for much longer, I hope! And Pitch, for...many things.’

Jack’s eyes were wide. To hear North be so candid, even when it was clearly not easy for him to be so, shocked him. He hadn’t realised that North was still so affected by the events of the gymnasium, to know that Sandy still hadn’t forgiven himself for what had happened to Mora...

‘I’m not good at this,’ Jack said, unsteadily.

‘Not good at what?’ North said, and Jack winced.

‘I spent so long on my own. I’m really bad at thinking about what other people have gone through, or what they’re going through now. I’m selfish,’ Jack said.

North shook his head.

‘Truly, no, you are not, Jack. Not in the way you are thinking, yes? You are trying to survive. And survival – by necessity – makes it hard to really *feel* what others might be feeling. You are caught up in your own feelings, yes? That is survival! But, Jack, listen to me. When we were at that gymnasium, who was it that understood *immediately* that those young children needed to feel strong enough to escape? It was you. You saw into their hearts and you saw what they needed, and you gave a piece of yourself so they could get free. And you were scared, Jack. I could tell. We both have big hearts. I have just had more practice keeping mine open. You have had to keep yours closed, for a long time. You have more in common with Pitch than you might think.’

‘Right,’ Jack said, starting to feel overwhelmed. Honestly, he’d just wanted some candy canes.

‘I simply came to remind you that I am here, if you want to talk,’ North said, standing up. ‘And thank you, Jack.’

‘What? Why?’ Jack said, and North beamed.

‘For talking, of course! Now, I must head off. I am thinking of some new toy concepts for Christmas this year, and I must tell the yeti as soon as possible, otherwise it will be mutiny, I am sure!’

‘Yeah, they’d never hold a mutiny against you,’ Jack said, smiling. ‘They adore you.’

‘Remind me to tell you about the Christmas of 1987, when I decided to change the run of toys on Christmas Eve, and we shall hear about some mutiny,’ North said, winking.

He left quickly after, and Jack stared at the doorway he’d exited through for some time, turning thoughts over in his unquiet mind.

\*

In the early afternoon, Jack flew up to the room Pitch had been occupying until recently; the new one that North had given him. He didn’t feel strong enough to see Pitch, but he wanted to be near him somehow. Even though he told himself it was stupid, he couldn’t stop himself from sneaking into the room and crawling onto the bed where Pitch had slept and suffered so many nightmares.

He curled up on his side and pressed the flat of his hand down onto the blanket, and then inhaled deeply. He could still smell Pitch. The sheets and blankets hadn't been changed yet. But the axe and the locket weren't here; Pitch had moved so that he was living alongside Jack again.

He was frightened of being close to Pitch again. There were times when Pitch had been having nightmares, and all Jack wanted to do was get into the bed with him, press his body into his, comfort him with physical presence instead of words. There were times when Pitch pressed his hand up into Jack's and he'd be dizzy by a wave of tactile memory that whispered how good it had once been between them.

Jack missed it, but if he thought about it too much, fear curdled.

He feared flashbacks. He feared he'd ruined everything. Once, he could easily handle Pitch appearing out of the shadows, seducing him, disappearing. Now, he was no longer that person. He didn't know if he ever would be again.

But he yearned for closeness. He and Pitch had always done so well on the currency of touch. Now that it was removed, Jack felt adrift.

He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, taking in Pitch's scent and curling his fingers into the bed, wishing things were different.

Jack startled when he felt a presence in the room. His eyes roved wildly and then he saw Pitch standing in the corner, having just teleported through the shadows.

Jack froze, abashed at being caught in Pitch's old room like this, on his bed.

'Anyone would think you missed me,' Pitch said, and Jack pushed his forehead down into the blanket, flushing.

'Well...yeah,' Jack said, and then laughed at himself. 'Yeah.'

'I'm sorry for earlier,' Pitch said, walking up to the edge of the bed. Jack tensed, could feel Pitch looking down at him. 'You have, of course, been dealing with the nightmares for some time, without anyone else to offer support. It must have been jarring to find me there in the room.'

It was always a little jarring to know that some people could see him; especially when he first woke up. But it was additionally difficult, knowing that for so long he'd been waking up and wanting Pitch there and...

'I'm going to sit down,' Pitch said, but did nothing until Jack nodded. Pitch sat down on the edge of the bed, much as Jack had many times before.

'What's it like?' Jack said, turning his face sideways so that he wasn't speaking directly into the mattress. 'What's it like when you read other people's fears?'

'It's...hard to explain. Most people's fears come through as colours. The muddier the colour, the deeper and older the fear. Those every day fears we carry around with us are clear and sit all over the colour spectrum. Terror is often white. When a particular fear is quite strong I can hear words, or see pictures, I suppose. But it is often distorted. Not that this particularly matters, I've had some practice interpreting fears, so even with a handful of words, or a single picture, I am able to put together what I am seeing.'

'Can you ignore them?' Jack said, shifting so that he could meet Pitch's eyes. Pitch smiled, and then shook his head. 'And you feel the fears of *everyone*? So, right now, North and Sandy and...'

'The yeti and the elves – for all that they manage to squeeze fear into their miniscule peanut sized minds – and sometimes, if I bend my concentration in that direction, the short, stark background fears of the larger animals nearby, all attempting to survive.'

'Animals too?' Jack said, and Pitch shrugged.

'That I can tune out. Can you not sense the wind always? The weather? If it taxed you overmuch, it would be a terrible burden. There are things we tune out, and I suppose these basic, constant fears are one of them.'

Jack thought about it. He could always sense the wind, the weather, the snow nearby. It never bothered him.

'The more I come to care for someone, the more attuned it is,' Pitch added.

'Yeah, that sounds...unfortunate.'

'It has its downsides,' Pitch said drily.

'You could single-handedly support the headache medication industry,' Jack said, and Pitch blinked at him.

'Jack, did you just make a *joke*?'

'What?' Jack said, and then shook his head. 'No, I don't do that anymore. Apparently.'

He sighed. He was in the middle of turning onto his side when he felt a warm hand on his shoulder blade. It was a firm, steady pressure, and Jack tensed, his fingers dug into the blankets.

'Is this so bad?' Pitch said, and Jack swallowed.

'No?' Jack said, but he wasn't sure. It was Pitch, he knew it was Pitch, and yet there was a rising apprehension thick in his lungs. He wanted the touch and yet...

The palm on his back swept down the curve of his ribs, soothingly, and Jack's vision blanked out.

'Stop, stop, stop, stop, *stop*,' Jack said, twisting out of the way, gasping for breath. Pitch had already yanked his hand back, his own chest heaving. Jack stared at him dismayed. 'I'm sorry.'

They both stared at each other. Pitch looked far from composed. Jack didn't know what to do. He wanted to say it was okay, that he could handle it, that it wasn't a problem. He wanted to unmake and undo the fear. He didn't know how.

Behind everything, there was a growing certainty that he was far more messed up by what had happened with August than he'd first thought. And, Jack realised, Pitch was right. August had known exactly what he was doing when he'd asked Jack to repeat the things he'd found comforting with Pitch. It was bad enough that he hadn't been able to resist the compulsions at the time, but this was far worse.

He half-expected Pitch to leave, to say something cutting.

Instead Pitch sighed and placed his hand down, palm up on the bed. He looked at Jack and his face softened, he raised his brow questioningly.

Jack stared at Pitch's palm, at the fingers slightly curled, unobtrusive. They'd done this before. They'd done this before and it had been okay.

Jack just wanted things to be okay.

He took a deep breath and reached out, ignored the fact that his hand and wrist were shaking. He lowered his hand down onto Pitch's and...nothing happened. Just that simple touch, and the sound of Jack's breathing in the room.

'It won't always be like this,' Pitch said, and Jack curled his fingers into Pitch's hand, wanting more, cursed by his own reactions.

'I miss you, though,' Jack said, and looked up at Pitch. 'I mean, I know, you don't have to say it. You're right here. But I *miss* you.'

'And I, you,' Pitch said, and he moved his hand minutely beneath Jack's.

Jack took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then looked into Pitch's eyes. His gaze drifted to Pitch's lips. He realised he was staring and looked away. How could he want something while being so scared of it? How was he supposed to deal with that?

'Tell me more about it,' Jack said, wanting something else to concentrate on.

'About what?' Pitch said, and Jack shrugged.

'About fear, and the colour of it, what it's like for you.'

'I can do that,' Pitch said with a faint smile. Jack relaxed his hand over Pitch's and then squeezed gently as Pitch began to talk. He felt an absurd amount of pleasure when Pitch squeezed back and Jack didn't feel any fear at all.

\*

Late afternoon, Gwyn arrived, and Jack was already waiting for him in the round table room, tapping his staff impatiently on the ground and sending small filaments of frost from the base of it with every bounce.

Gwyn saw Jack's expression and frowned.

'I believe if any of us has the right to be disappointed, or unhappy, it's-'

'So, Pitch has this theory,' Jack said, standing up and glaring. 'Pitch's theory is that you *wanted* me to freak out around Ash, so that Ash would be more convinced that something needed to be done about his brother.'

Gwyn's eyes widened comically. If it had been any other situation, Jack might have laughed at the confirmation. Instead, the anger inside him tangled and knotted inside of himself and he slammed his staff into the ground. Frost lightning flew out of it.

'You *used* me!' he shouted. 'And not in a way that's okay, Gwyn! You can't use people like that!'

'You weren't supposed to find out,' Gwyn said, and Jack shook his head.

'Nope. Try again, that's not the way this works. You knew I was struggling, and you decided to *use* that? And you got angry at *me* because it didn't work? What the hell, Gwyn!'

A muscle in Gwyn's jaw clenched, and then he turned away, staring out of the arched window.

'It's what I came here to talk to you about,' Gwyn said stiffly. 'We are going back, we are doing

this again. You will be there when we meet with Ash.'

'What?' Jack said, horrified. 'After last time? No. *No*.'

'Yes,' Gwyn said, turning back, a determined set to his face. 'Yes. Your reaction to Ash, your reaction to the mention of August, it *helps* our cause. I would never have wished what happened upon you, Jack, but it *happened*. Ash is a sympathetic fae, even with you attempting to kill him and Gulvi, he will be disarmed by your vulnerability. You will *tell* him what happened to you.'

Jack took a step backwards. This was not what he signed up for.

'He doesn't need excruciating detail,' Gwyn added. 'He just needs the outline. He won't believe me, he will suspect me of playing him. But I think almost any fae with half a brain will look at you and believe you.'

'Gwyn,' Jack said, shaking his head. He almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. He wanted to be angry, but it had all washed away beneath his shock. 'I thought we were friends.'

Gwyn laughed, but it sounded as devoid of mirth as Jack's did, of late. He shook his head rapidly, as though clearing it, and then stared at Jack. In that moment, Jack didn't see a King. He didn't know what he was seeing.

'Jack, I can't be your friend. I...I don't know how. But, I do know how to begin saving these Kingdoms. I have an idea on how to restore order. These things I can do. Do you understand? Do you at least *see* what I'm trying to do?'

Jack felt disarmed. There was an awkwardness to Gwyn that he felt he understood. His own awkwardness expressed itself differently, but it was there, nonetheless.

'Gwyn,' Jack said, despairing, 'I can't even talk to Pitch about it.'

'Which is why Pitch will not be there. Nor Gulvi. Just you, me and Ash.'

'Why though?' Jack said. 'Why Ash?'

'We need more than just someone to work against August from the inside, Jack. I need someone whom I can manoeuvre into the position of Unseelie King, when the Unseelie Court is shattered. Ash is beloved by both the Seelie and the Unseelie alike. He's a good candidate. They will vote for him.'

'He doesn't look like someone who wants to be King,' Jack said, head spinning. How far ahead was Gwyn planning?

'He's approachable, he will help build stability in the Unseelie Court once more. He doesn't have to want to be King.'

Gwyn's voice hardened, he sounded as though he knew what that was like.

'How can he be like...the way he is, and August be so evil? Ash said his brother was *good*,' Jack said, and Gwyn looked past Jack, as though checking they were truly alone. But the door was closed, no one else was in the room with them.

'Nothing can ever excuse how August has behaved towards the fae, towards *you*, towards his Kingdom. *Nothing*. But if you're asking me if this is the August I've known, for most of my life, then...I err towards Ash's judgement. He was good. Unseelie? Yes. Ate humans? Well, a lot of us

do. That doesn't make him evil, he cannot help the way he was born.'

Jack looked down.

'If...if that's true, how much of this do you think is like indirectly the Nightmare King's doing? I mean, I *hate* August, but...'

'I think we'll need Pitch in the end, too,' Gwyn said quietly. 'He may not be the Nightmare King, but I think simply having him nearby puts August off balance.'

Jack scowled at him.

'You're so manipulative. You can't help it, can you? Who does that? Who thinks, 'Oh, Jack's been assaulted by the Each Uisge, I know, I'll use that to save my Kingdom! And not tell him! Shame he freaked out on me. Better throw a tantrum about it.''

'I did not throw a tantrum about it!' Gwyn said, and Jack smirked.

'Come on, you did. You threw me against a *wall*. I nearly died, and you still threw me against a wall. North had to throw you out! Finding it hard to keep on top of all of your tools are you? Finding it hard to-'

Jack cut himself off when he saw the expression on Gwyn's face. The part of him that was exulting in taunting the King of the Seelie fae disappeared.

'Shit,' Jack said quietly. 'I'm sorry.'

Gwyn walked over to the table, and pulled out a chair. He sat down and rested both of his forearms on the table, staring into the bowl of his palms. Jack flew up onto the table itself, crouched down and looked at Gwyn sideways, wishing he knew what to do. This was...the King of a fae Court. Jack had seen his power many times. He'd seen him immediately off a battlefield and been filled with dread. And yet now Gwyn simply looked tired and off-balance.

'I don't really know how to be friends either,' Jack said, quietly. 'I still thought we were friends.'

'Because I climbed a mountain with you?' Gwyn said cynically.

'Hey, that was a bonding experience,' Jack said, and remembered – briefly – the night they'd shared nightmares. Jack had kissed him and- Jack's eyes widened. *I'm going to have to tell Pitch about that at some point. Gwyn said Pitch wouldn't mind but...*

'If friendship means that I must put you aside, so that I cannot best position myself to secure the safety of the fae Kingdoms, then I cannot be friends with you,' Gwyn said. He sounded disappointed.

'Are you even sorry you did it? Are you sorry now, knowing that you're asking me to talk about what happened to me, with *Ash*? Knowing who he reminds me of?'

Gwyn looked up and maintained a steady eye contact with Jack. His forehead was furrowed, his mouth pulled down at the corners, and it told him all he needed to know.

'Yeah. Okay,' Jack said. 'I'll do it. The meeting with Ash. I don't know how much use I'll be. I don't actually think I *can* talk about it. But whatever. If you think it'll save a *Kingdom*.'

Gwyn's mouth lifted at the corners, the slightest of smiles.



'Maybe two,' Gwyn said, and Jack sighed, sitting down on the table and crossing his legs.

'Gwyn, if I tell you something, do you promise not to get angry at me?'

'Prefaced like that, I would have to say absolutely not,' Gwyn said.

'I killed someone. A fae. After the meeting.'

Gwyn's head snapped up, his eyes narrowed. He scrutinised Jack closely, and then placed his palms flat on the table. Jack couldn't tell what he was thinking. His skin crawled under that singular focus. He felt like he was being dissected.

'What happened?' Gwyn said.

'I was overwhelmed. Pitch had just found out and I needed to get away and so I-'

'You went beyond the ward?' Gwyn said, and Jack nodded. 'So it was self-defence?'

'I didn't want to,' Jack whispered. 'He didn't give me a choice. It was me or him.'

'I'm not angry,' Gwyn said. 'It's unrealistic to expect you to stay within the safety of the ward constantly, even if it does put you in danger. If anything, I'm relieved that you were able to defend yourself. With powers that are still wildly out of control, I expect.'

'Yeah,' Jack said. 'Yeah. They're- I can't test them around here. It's too dangerous. And of course I can't really just go beyond the ward and test them anywhere else, at the moment.'

Gwyn sighed. Jack knew it had nothing to do with what he'd just said. Gwyn seemed far away in his own thoughts. After a while, he tilted his head at Jack.

'And so, you no longer have the protection of the scarf. How are you and Pitch faring?'

'It's difficult,' Jack said. 'One of the things I liked the most about the both of us, was how easy it was. The two of us.'

'Easy?' Gwyn said, and Jack nodded.

'Yeah, I mean, for me. By my standards, I guess. Now, I freak out a lot. I keep telling Pitch it's nothing but...'

'It's not,' Gwyn said, and Jack shook his head.

'It *should* be nothing.'

'But it's not,' Gwyn said, persistently, and Jack swallowed.

'In the past we would, if talking ever got too hard, there was- I mean he'd try and be close to me, and that would help. I find talking hard sometimes, you know. I didn't do much of it, for a while. I mean, not with anyone other than myself, anyway.'

'That doesn't really count,' Gwyn said, and Jack nodded.

'And now, I just miss how it was. How easy it was to share ourselves, physically. It makes it really hard.'

Gwyn interlaced his fingers and looked sideways, gathering his thoughts. After a while he looked

directly at Jack, and Jack had to look away under the weight of that stare. He expected that Gwyn would tell him to pull himself together, that they didn't have time for this, that there were fae who were dealing with far worse, *dying*. He'd heard a lot of these kinds of things from Gwyn.

'Something hard is often worth having, Jack Frost.'

Jack looked back, surprised.

'You became a warrior, to save him,' Gwyn said, looking down at his fingers. 'Maybe you have to learn to be a warrior in this, too.'

Jack frowned. He hadn't thought of it quite like that. He'd thought that, because it was so much harder now, maybe Pitch would want to give up. Maybe it was a sign that their relationship was unhealthy. Gwyn had managed to reframe it all in a few sentences, and Jack felt oddly hopeful.

'That sounds like suspiciously good advice, coming from you.'

'My general method is to apply battlefield analogies to everything. Sometimes they stick,' Gwyn said, and Jack smiled. Gwyn with no dra'ocht, awkward and not even understanding what friendship was supposed to look like, was a Gwyn that Jack felt he could handle.

Pitch wouldn't approve at all of Jack meeting with Ash without him there. And he didn't have the scarf to fall back on anymore, to hide his fears.

'Pitch isn't going to like it,' Jack said. 'You, me and Ash alone, in a meeting.'

'I expect he won't.'

Jack looked up at the heavy, exposed beams of the ceiling, traced the cobwebs with his eyes.

'Gwyn, how come you don't know how to be friends with people? Haven't you been around for a really long time? I mean, surely you picked that up, right?'

Gwyn didn't answer, and when Jack looked back down again, Gwyn was staring at his hands. He looked pensive. Jack opened his mouth to ask more questions, to ask how it had worked out that way, to push further, and then closed it again. Sometimes it was better to leave things alone.

\*

Jack crept into Pitch's room in the early hours of the morning. Pitch wasn't asleep, as Jack thought he would be, but sitting in the armchair, reading quietly.

'What are you reading?'

'A book on battleaxes,' Pitch said and Jack paused, then came closer.

'Any good?'

'Dreary, witless, a bore. Quite relaxing, when you think about it.'

Pitch leaned down and placed the book on the coffee table and then smiled at it, darkly.

Jack gazed at the armchair framing Pitch's body, turned his attention to Pitch sitting there, and his heart started beating wildly, a sharp tattoo in his chest. He thought about what Gwyn had said, about things often being worth having, even when they were hard; or even – perhaps – *because* they were hard. He thought of how Pitch could kiss him, the vocabulary of his kisses, the sweet

and gentle ones, the raw ones that made Jack forget his name.

Pitch had made Jack forget a great deal of stress in this room. It was dangerous being here again, he couldn't not think about it. He'd been pushed up against that wall, more than once. He'd realised how much he enjoyed going down on Pitch, on that bed. They'd kissed in that armchair.

This whole room, filled with memories.

'Jack?' Pitch said, curiously.

Jack licked his lips, avoided eye contact, wondered if he was about to do something incredibly stupid.

'Will you...kiss me?'

Jack could feel Pitch's gaze on him, but couldn't look over. He tensed when Pitch stood, and then wished, so much, that his fear didn't ratchet upwards when Pitch walked towards him. He was only a few feet away when Jack took a step backwards. It felt hard to breathe, all of a sudden. It felt like...it felt like...Jack resolutely turned his mind away from the sensation of it, didn't want those memories to be anywhere near this room.

Pitch hissed out a breath.

'Do you think I'm going to *hurt* you, Jack?' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

'Stop it,' Jack said.

'I know it happened underwater. In the deep,' Pitch said, and Jack couldn't move. 'It must have felt like *drowning*.'

He sounded unstable. And the sensation of drowning came back, thick and heavy, passing through his lungs. It had been there all along, in the dread of asking Pitch to kiss him, even now, standing there, knowing the kiss wasn't likely to happen.

'He did it to hurt *you*,' Jack said, voice thick. 'And it's working.'

'Is that what he told you?' Pitch said, deceptively quiet. 'Did that make it easier? Is that what you've been telling yourself every time you've woken up unmoored? Every time you've thought longingly of touch and physical affection, only to find a strange nausea knocking on your door? That he did it to hurt *me*?'

'Yes,' Jack choked out, passing a hand over his face so that Pitch couldn't see his expression.

'He may have had an ulterior motive in mind, but, Jack, he did it to hurt you.'

'You don't know that,' Jack said. 'You don't know how obsessed he is with you. You just don't-'

'It's something he's wanted to do, likely from the moment he met you. Certainly he was intent when he visited us in Kostroma. And perhaps...directly or indirectly, it was because of your connection to me. But, Jack, he wanted to hurt *you*.'

'I just wanted to kiss you, not...*this*,' Jack said, and Pitch made a small, amused sound.

'We can still kiss.'

'Please tell me you're not serious?'

Jack stared when Pitch closed the space between them. He was surprised when he didn't tense up. Surprised when, even with the close proximity between them, Jack felt as though the drowning sensations were far away. He kept expecting fear to crawl over him, sick and sinister, but it stayed back in the wings. It was distracted, he realised, by the sudden switch in their conversation, by the way Pitch had changed the topic again.

'Do you think I'm going to hurt you?' Pitch said, his tone far more neutral than it had been before.

'No,' Jack whispered.

'Since we seem to have far better luck with this method, you could come up here. You could kiss me.'

Jack stared up at Pitch, aware of the height difference between them. He hopped hesitantly up onto a quiet wind, and swallowed, nervous. Now it was not the fears from earlier plaguing him, but a natural reticence born of little experience. Pitch knew what he was doing. Jack did not.

He edged forwards, rested his fingertips on Pitch's robe, over his chest. He traced over the embroidery he could see, staring hard at it. He could feel heat, could smell cinnamon and a faint musk. He was glad for the wind beneath his feet, because it could take him away in an instant if he so desired. But in this moment, he wanted to stay.

Jack's fingers crept up Pitch's chest until they rested on the fabric collar of the robe. He felt stitching underneath his fingers. The cloth beneath that felt thick, like a densely packed felt.

He reached up and touched fingertips to Pitch's jawline. He traced the curve of his skin until he could rest his fingers over Pitch's mouth. He touched his bottom lip, marvelling at the exhalation from Pitch's nose blowing over his fingernails. Pitch's lips were mostly soft, but there were places where they had chapped. He wasn't sure why. He traced the texture of them until Pitch's mouth fell open and he sighed out a hot, moist breath. Jack shivered.

Jack looked up at Pitch's face, saw that unwavering, golden eye contact. His heart was pounding fit to burst.

*Maybe I have to be a warrior in this, too.*

He curved his fingers back until they traced Pitch's cheekbone, and then further until he could outline the shape of his ear.

'I missed you,' Jack said, his voice loud in the stillness of the room. 'You know that already.'

'I like hearing it,' Pitch said, and it was at the moment of his rueful smile that Jack leaned in and captured the curve of Pitch's mouth with his lips, praying that his fear would stay away.

He held his lips still for a few seconds, just making sure the contact itself didn't cause an explosion of fear. When it didn't, he opened his mouth and touched his tongue, lightly, to Pitch's upper lip. He curled his hand around Pitch's face properly, let his hand feel burned with warmth. Pitch's breathing was already heavier.

He pressed small, butterfly kisses across Pitch's mouth, and then kissed his way up the side of Pitch's face, before pressing closed lips to the bump of Pitch's cheek. He felt dizzy with all that he dared. Only minutes ago, he'd been terrified. And yet now...

'Are you alright?' Pitch asked and Jack shook his head, nodded.

'I don't know. I feel a bit...out of control. My heart is going crazy.'

Jack slid back down and opened his mouth against Pitch's lips, slipping his tongue into heat, breath hitching as it seared him. He did everything slowly, afraid of unleashing his own fear. Pitch stayed cautiously still against him, and Jack missed his confidence, missed the days when Pitch would simply take control; that felt far more natural. But Jack was grateful for the chance to just explore for himself. He pushed his tongue under Pitch's, curled back and slid his tongue along the inside of Pitch's teeth, feeling heady when Pitch made the smallest of sounds.

He drew back and exhaled. His breath shuddered. Nausea pressed up inside of him.

'I have to stop,' Jack said. 'I don't want to, but I have to.'

'It's good,' Pitch said, closing his eyes. 'It's good that you know that.'

'I really don't want to,' Jack said, lowering his forehead to Pitch's shoulder, licking the taste of Pitch off his lips.

Pitch murmured a hushing noise, but didn't move to wrap arms around Jack, didn't run fingers through his hair. Jack was glad of Pitch's sensitivity and frustrated too. He wanted so much more.

'You could sit with me. I assure you, the book is *most* relaxing,' Pitch said, and Jack smiled against his robe.

'We get it. Everyone gets it. You hate the axe.'

Pitch took a step backwards, and Jack slowly sank down to the ground again.

'Join me?' Pitch said, and Jack nodded.

Pitch sat and Jack joined him on the armrest, hooking his staff over the back of the armchair and resting his head stiffly on Pitch's shoulder. He folded his arms around himself, felt off kilter, but was glad all the same that he had gotten what he came for.

Jack thought that Gwyn might be right.

Just because it was hard, didn't mean it wasn't worth having.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Do We Have A Thing?' Toothiana returns! Jack talks with Bunnymund about centres! Gwyn and Jack have a meeting with Ash! Do Pitch and Jack have a thing? (Seriously Jack, find a better term).

# Do We Have A Thing?

## Chapter Notes

Hi folks, remember you can find me on Tumblr as [Not Poignant](#).

Thanks for all your wonderful kudos and comments as well. They are just so motivational and appreciated, and really help when a chapter is being frustrating - like this one was!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The rest of the evening with Pitch was uneventful. Jack went to his room later, unwilling to fall asleep against Pitch's side and have nightmares. They'd hardly talked, but things were far more companionable between them. As Jack had left the room, he'd looked again at Pitch's lips, and then reluctantly decided that if he pushed himself too hard now, he'd probably regret it later. As it was, he already felt hung-over at his daring, felt stretched too thin.

The next day, Bunnymund visited. Jack wanted to see him for a change, wanted to try and express thanks that Bunnymund hadn't betrayed his secret about Makara's scarf to anyone.

He felt apprehension as Bunnymund exited the kitchens with North. Bunnymund was unpredictable, but Jack at least owed him an acknowledgement, perhaps. Still, the great Pooka made Jack extremely nervous in a way that none of the other Guardians did.

Jack waved at Bunnymund, and they ended up in the quiet, earthy tunnel that led down to North's reindeer. Bunnymund seemed to like the place, even though there was nowhere to really sit, except on the ground. Perhaps it reminded him of his own tunnels.

'So, uh, thanks, I guess. Because you didn't tell North or Sandy about the scarf, and...I know you probably wanted to?'

'Too right, I did,' Bunnymund said, and then his eyes softened, he shrugged. 'I know a little of those scarves. Can't wear them forever, mate. And besides, I saw you. I saw how scared you were. I dunno, figured it might be a bit much if I went and told the rest of the Guardians about it.'

Jack leaned back against the wall, stared up at Bunnymund. The Pooka squatted on his haunches, comfortable underground, even though it was cooler here than it was in the Workshop itself and Bunnymund had always preferred the warm. Jack thought of North saying that Bunnymund was carrying many heavy burdens, and trying to get through it all. He wondered what Bunnymund and North talked about.

'I used to think,' Bunnymund said softly, 'that you liked being alone. I've met a lot of rascals in my time, and some of 'em – tricksters – prefer it. I didn't think you were trying to be friends, first time we met. I thought you were a trickster spirit, and honestly Jack, I don't have much time for them. They drive me up the wall.'

'You just wanted me gone,' Jack said, remembering. Bunnymund nodded.

'Yep.'

Jack didn't know what to say to that. He didn't know what kind of spirit he was, except a frost spirit. He didn't know if he used to be a trickster as well, he supposed he could see it. He wasn't overly fussed with categories. He was Jack Frost. He had just wanted to be seen.

'Thing is Jack, I know now, don't I? I'm not gonna apologise for the past, we've both made each other's lives miserable on occasion, and I'm not one for wasting time on dwelling. We've got Buckley's chance of fixing what's already been done. But the future? That's a different story.'

'Is it?' Jack said, and Bunnymund smiled, nodded.

Jack tried to ignore the small amount of hope he felt at that. It was probably just Bunnymund's influence, after all.

'Your centre is changing again,' Bunnymund said, ears twitching. 'Must feel a bit all over the place then, hey, mate?'

Jack frowned.

'You didn't know?' Bunnymund pushed his back into the dirt wall and rubbed the grain of his fur in the opposite direction, giving himself a quick scratch. 'If you roll from one centre into the next, fun into resolve, say, it's less upsetting for the spirit than if a centre suddenly stops working, and you haven't got another one waiting in the wings.'

'So...wait, what?' Jack said, and Bunnymund scratched dirt out of his fur.

'Well it works one of two ways, the change. The first is that your soul is already bent towards its next centre. The transition can be hard, because it's always hard when your centre is changing; but your soul and your mind knows where it needs to go. There's a pathway. You're not muddling about in the dark like some boofhead, are you?

'The other way is...ah mate, that's the path less travelled, isn't it? A cliché in spiritual circles, but it'll do for our purposes. Imagine you have yourself a centre, but the soul is restless. The centre you have isn't nourishing enough, it doesn't *fit*, and it's not right. But nothing else is ready yet, because your soul is still growing. It's still figuring out where it needs to go, what it's supposed to be doing. Suddenly you're tipped out into the dark and everything's confusing. The soul doesn't like it, but it has to keep searching. It's a disturbing time.'

'I just thought with everything that's happened, I mean...with what happened to me...' Jack said, and Bunnymund nodded.

'Yep, well, nothing happens in a vacuum, Frost. You've been all over the place because of everything that's happened, but it's shoved you pretty firmly out into the dark.'

'It,' Jack paused, tried to gather his thoughts. 'It makes me feel kinda helpless. Just waiting for the new centre.'

'Helpless?' Bunnymund said with a grin. 'Mate, it's *opportunity*. Choose where you want it to go, and influence it!'

Jack stared at him.

'What?'

'I've had my own dark night of the soul. I've had more than one. You think I would've naturally fallen into hope on my own? No, not with what I was dealing with. I made a choice. But then, a

long time ago, I was very concerned with the alchemy of things. Transformation. Transmogrification. I became really bloody interested in the theory and magic of centres, and how they change. Look, mate, look at me, I'm a giant rabbit with a vast history in magic and sorcery, do you think hope came naturally to me? It didn't. Still doesn't.'

'Then why did you choose it?'

'*Influenced*,' Bunnymund corrected, and then he shrugged, 'I needed some more of it. I wanted to be able to share it with others. I still get to have my alchemy. There's nothing better than transforming a single white googie into a colourful symbol of hope, and seeing the look on kid's faces when they see 'em for the first time at Easter. That's my bread and butter, mate.'

Jack smiled and looked down at the ground.

'How do you influence it, though?' Jack said, and Bunnymund took out his boomerang and spun it absently. Nearby, Jack heard the sound of one of North's reindeer chuffing, and then a deep, brief lowing.

'Maybe two ways, I think. It's not a sure art. The first is that you can pick a theme and head in that direction. Maybe you want fun again?'

Jack shook his head rapidly, and Bunnymund narrowed his eyes.

'Are you serious?'

'I don't like it,' Jack said. 'I know Pitch misses it, but I don't like it. I could never have saved Pitch if my centre had been fun. And-'

'What, you think you're gonna have to save him for the rest of your life?' Bunnymund said, frowning, whiskers flattening against his cheeks. 'You think you've gotta be like this, forever?'

'No,' Jack said, brow furrowing at the question. 'It's not that, I just-'

'You can't go flat out like a lizard drinking for the rest of your life, Jack. You'll do your head in. You're not looking for something *practical*. You're looking for something that can sustain *you*. It's not about other people.'

'It is,' Jack said, and Bunnymund scratched at his ear. 'No, it is though. It is about other people. What if I pick something that's like, great for *me* and all, but means that I spend centuries all...'

Jack couldn't finish the sentence. Bunnymund dropped his paw and sighed.

'You're an idiot. Why do you think you became a Guardian? What brought you back into our lives?'

'And what's kept me separate from all of you since then? Huh? I've never been really close to any of you, and you *know* that.'

'You think that was because of your *centre*? ' Bunnymund said, incredulous and Jack folded his arms.

'I don't want to talk about this. Tell me how to influence a new centre,' Jack said, voice hardening.

'The other way, is to start behaving in a way that encourages the new centre to grow. You make choices, mate, and those choices put energy in that direction. It still might not work at the end of



the day, but while your centre is in flux, you got a fair go of giving it a push in a different direction.'

Jack had no idea what he wanted his new centre to be. Resolve was probably not the way to go. He'd made some decisions he regretted when his centre had been resolve. But fun was...problematic. It was easy to hide from himself, from what he was feeling, when he always had fun to fall back on. He didn't want to feel trapped beneath his centres. He wished he didn't need to have one at all. They seemed more trouble than they were worth.

'Give it a think,' Bunnymund said, expansively. 'There's a new centre coming anyway, whether you do anything about it or not. It's a painful, powerful alchemy.'

'Do you think I'll still be able to be a Guardian?' Jack said, a question he'd asked North before. A question he still thought about often. After all, how could he be a Guardian when he had almost nothing to do with children?

'I think you're gonna be fine, mate,' Bunnymund said. 'You worry too much about these things. No need to go on like a chook with its head cut off. How about you just wait and see what happens, before thinking that you have to hand in your resignation? We've all had times when we've lost touch with the kids mate. This is your first time, isn't it? It's always hardest the first time you lose touch with 'em, but it never lasts.'

Jack squared his shoulders and wrapped his arm around his ribs absently.

'It really matters to you that much, then? Being a Guardian?' Bunnymund said, and Jack stared at him, incredulous. Bunnymund held up his giant paws, realising what he'd said; his ears flattened and his eyes widened. 'Didn't mean anything by it.'

'You always do,' Jack said, and then looked down at the ground. 'That's the thing, you always do. You just can't believe I would care about this, do you? I just don't know why. I've spent a really long time doing what I can for kids, and you just...'

'Hey, now, back up. This, whatever this friendship is, it's not easy for either of us. Okay? It's not easy for *me*. I might be older than you, and I think that actually puts me at a bleedin' disadvantage, because you keep expecting me to be the one who isn't going to muck this up. I *do* believe you care about being a Guardian, but I've got some old habits that die hard and well, this is gonna take time. You get that?'

Jack nodded. Bunnymund was right, Jack did assume that because he was older, even wiser, that he would be the one to make sure that everything went fine. It was hard to imagine that Bunnymund found this as difficult as he did.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said, offering a small smile.

'Yeah, well, I don't know about sorry, but at least we're talking again, right?'

Bunnymund's eyes crinkled, his cheeks puffed with a smile. Jack was about to agree when a tiny blur of green, purple and turquoise whizzed past him. It backtracked and hovered in front of his face. Jack blinked, then felt a rush of excitement.

'Baby Tooth!'

'Toothiana is here, is she?' Bunnymund said, looking down the tunnel.

Baby Tooth squeaked in agreement, and a moment later Toothiana was flying towards them, wings

flickering quickly, a broad smile on her face.

‘I thought you were laying low!’ Bunnymund said, and Jack felt a small flash of fear before realising that she wouldn’t look so happy if something was wrong.

‘Laying low! Well, what can I say? I tried it and it wasn’t for me. I have a feeling you guys might need me, so I decided to leave the baby teeth with tooth collecting – they’ve been doing it long enough without me after all! – and I’m going to stay here for a little while. Oh, I might go out on some forays of my own, it’s just so wonderful to collect the teeth and see the children’s wonderful sleeping faces but what am I saying? *Jack!*’

Jack didn’t even have time to back up before Toothiana bowled into him and clutched him quickly in her arms. Before Jack could panic, she had already let go, concern and happiness on her face.

‘No hug for a Pooka?’ Bunnymund said, and Toothiana whirled on him and gave him a brief hug. She smiled down at Baby Tooth, and then looked over her shoulder.

‘What is everyone doing down in a warren? It’s a lovely day outside, you should be out in your spring sunshine, Aster, with your eggs. And Jack, let’s go for a walk. I’ve *missed* you.’

Jack blinked away his shock, and then they both followed her as she lead them out of the tunnel, and back into the Workshop. Baby Tooth was already nestling in the hood of his sweatshirt, as though no time had passed at all.

\*

‘I’m so out of the loop!’ Toothiana exclaimed, as they meandered outside near the edge of the protective ward. She smiled over at Jack and then sighed. ‘I should never have listened to North. I wanted to stay, but he thought that if anything happened to any of you, someone should be there to take over as head Guardian. Can you imagine having that conversation? I still can’t believe the idiot convinced me it was a good idea. If the Guardians aren’t meant to make it, then you can be sure I’m going to be here fighting with the rest of you!’

‘There hasn’t been much fighting,’ Jack said, and Toothiana snorted.

‘It’s been a long time, Jack, but I’m familiar with battle. Look at the toll it’s taking on you! I mean no hurt by it, but you look exhausted. As does North. *And Sandy!*’

‘You’re looking good though,’ Jack said, and Toothiana laughed.

‘As someone who flies off on tangents all the time, that’s a great attempt at changing the subject. I want to know, Jack, what’s been happening? I hear rumours from the birds, from my baby teeth. And of course North occasionally sends me missives when he thinks they won’t be intercepted. Actually I haven’t had any for a while, because of August’s winged messenger network.’

‘You know about that?’ Jack said, and Toothiana hummed in agreement.

‘They’re bird people Jack, of course I know. Most of them are underfae, not actually as powerful as the higher status fae, and the Each Uisge has promised to increase their status if they work for him. It’s bribery but oh, it’s effective. Not many fae want to stay as underfae.’

‘Underfae?’ Jack said, and Toothiana scratched at her feathers briefly.

‘The fae system is a class-based system. North’s elves are underfae, for example. You have underfae, Capital, Court, Inner Court, and a bunch of others. Each confers a different level of

power and ability. Underfae can be killed quite easily, they have a finite lifespan, and they're vulnerable, Jack. They are often forced out into less desirable landscapes, or they're constantly having their lands and territories challenged. Bird underfae, for example, are often warriors. They just...don't get a choice. The best mercenaries out there are often bird people. We know how to fight!'

'Flying probably helps,' Jack said, and Toothiana grinned.

'That is an advantage! But these flyers that the Each Uisge is working with, well, he's promised them something that's hard to get. It's not every day that a fae gets raised up in status, after all! They get what they're born with, and that's that. But a King can do it, and you know, we're dealing with some desperate families.'

Jack stumbled and frowned.

'Families?'

'Mm, most of the flyers, the bird people, are recruited from families. You know, they just want to protect their children or their spouses, or they want to look after elders and their family. Family is important to a lot- What's wrong!'

Jack couldn't stop thinking of the still form of the winged fae he had left behind in the Arctic Circle. His bedraggled clothes, the sabre with the unusually ornate hilt. Had Augus given that to him? Was he trying to protect or look after his family? Were they, even now, wondering where their father was?

'Jack?' Toothiana said, and then touched his shoulder so lightly, so quickly, that the touch was gone before he'd noticed it. Baby Tooth had roused out of his hood, and was squeaking gently near him. He shook his head briefly.

'I killed one of them,' Jack said, unable to look at Toothiana. What would she think of him? 'He was gonna kill me.'

'Oh, Jack, is that what you're worried about?' Toothiana said, and then sighed, 'I've had to kill a few. I almost didn't get here in one piece, some are very well trained.'

Jack looked at her in surprise and she shrugged, her head feathers raised briefly.

'You have to do what you have to do to survive, Jack. That's the law of the jungle. It's hard. It should be hard. But they made their choices, we made our choices.'

'What if he had a family?' Jack said, and Toothiana nodded and then pursed her lips.

'That's a really good thing to ask yourself, but you can't take responsibility for his family, if he had one. You can't dig into that, Jack. You'll drive yourself crazy. Sometimes I look at the memories of the children whose teeth I'm caretaking, you know, I can't help it sometimes. And a child's happy memories, well some of them aren't always so happy, Jack. And I get curious, and I wonder if I can help or do more, but...there are so many children, and I have to look after my baby teeth, and make sure all the children's teeth are collected, I can't do it all. I'd like to think I can! But I can't. And you can't either.'

Jack took a deep breath and sighed it out. He hadn't realised that Toothiana sometimes felt responsibility towards the children beyond her role as keeper of their memories. She worked so hard already, it pained him to think that she wanted to do more.

‘Come on,’ Toothiana said, flying forward slowly, and Jack followed. ‘I’m going to tell you what I know.’

‘Huh?’

‘It must have felt awful when Pitch was possessed with the shadows again. To go from someone you love to being your enemy like that. The Nightmare King wears Pitch’s face, speaks in his voice. But you know, for me, I actually saw how truly different they were when I had my first nightmare given to me by the Nightmare King. I was already starting to come round, but that kind of made it real for me, in a way. I talked to him before I came to find you two, I think he needs someone he can talk to, because you’re great Jack, but a person needs more than one friend.’

‘He and North get along,’ Jack said, confused, and Toothiana laughed.

‘Well they do, but Jack you probably haven’t really noticed the fact that North is still pretty protective of you? North and Pitch get along, but Pitch can’t go to him and talk to him about anything really meaningful, or he *could*, but he wouldn’t. And of course Bunnymund is out of the question. And Pitch and Sandy have a tentative friendship, but it’s hard to be close friends with Sandy, he’s always a little bit in the dreamworld he creates for others, you know?’

Jack realised that he’d really missed Toothiana. She didn’t respond to Jack’s awkwardness with her own, instead bringing the constancy of her personality with her.

‘You want to be his friend?’ Jack said, and Toothiana chuckled.

‘There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there? But he’s good to talk to, and I can hold my own against him, I’m not worried. He doesn’t like it when you look at his teeth though! *Touchy*.’

‘Yeah, they’re called boundaries, Tooth,’ Jack said, and Toothiana laughed outright.

‘I know, I know, I can’t help myself. Speaking of, how are your pearly whites going? Still perfect? I just want to-’

She flew towards him and Jack panicked.

‘Nope,’ Jack said, stepping back immediately. ‘Not today? Maybe some other time?’

The idea of Toothiana putting her fingers anywhere near his mouth...

‘All good!’ Toothiana said briskly. ‘Maybe some other time, hey?’

She smiled at him reassuringly, warmth and concern in her eyes, and Jack dropped his arms.

‘Yeah, another day.’

‘Wonderful. Remind me the next time we see the Each Uisge to punch out a few of his teeth.’

Jack laughed weakly, shivering. He tried to make his breathing slow and even. These small things, they jolted him out of normalcy, made him feel like he was constantly on a tightrope. The fact that Toothiana – who wouldn’t hurt him in a million years – could inspire that sort of instinctive reaction was frustrating.

‘What do you know?’ Jack said, and Toothiana sighed.

‘Not much, Jack. Like I said, I am out of the loop. I know enough to know that horse is going down, though. Yeah? Like old times, the Guardians together again. I’d write our advertising except

I'm too busy.'

'How are you even going to find the time, with everything that you do?'

'I'm going to make time until this is over. It's important! Besides, North gets busy at this time of year, and it'd be good to have some more people around the Workshop! I like it here, everything's bright and colourful, and the yeti make a fantastic mango lassi, oh and their smoothies; just to *die* for.'

'Isn't that a bit sugary for you? You know, cavities and tooth decay and all of that?'

Toothiana bumped her shoulder into Jack's as they continued walking.

'No, silly! With good dental hygiene you can eat whatever you like, and well, they're delicious, Jack. You just have to try one.'

Jack nodded and offered a small, quick smile. Toothiana beamed back at him, but he could tell that she was seeing more than she was letting on. But she didn't push him, and the rest of their conversation passed lightly. It wasn't until they parted ways in the kitchens that Jack realised he felt as though a small weight had been lifted off his shoulders, and he smiled at both she and Baby Tooth as he floated back up through the Workshop, glad that she was back.

\*

If Jack thought about it, he could feel the texture of Pitch's bottom lip against the pads of his fingers. He could feel the tiny chapped spaces, the smooth skin in between, the way Pitch had opened his mouth and breathed against his fingernails, warm and inviting. It had been strange to be the one in control. It contradicted his own instincts. It wasn't that he didn't like it, it was simply that he knew, deep down, he preferred Pitch to be in control.

Still, it had been thrilling, to caress and touch, and Pitch simply allowing him to explore.

Jack sought him out, finding him alone in the library, surrounded once again by books. Pitch read more than almost anyone he had ever met.

'Toothiana wants to be your friend,' Jack said, by way of greeting, and Pitch snorted.

'Yes, I could tell, when she said: 'I'm thinking of trying to be your friend, what do you think?' Disturbingly candid, if you ask me.'

'You like her,' Jack said, seeing the small, pleased crinkle at the corner of Pitch's eyes. Pitch looked up at him, opened his mouth to disagree, and then shrugged with a single shoulder.

Jack flew over and perched on the ottoman, where a stack of books rested. He looked down at Pitch and then looked around the library, unsure of what he wanted. He wanted more, but he didn't know what that meant. He wanted Pitch, but he didn't even know what *that* meant.

He hopped off the ottoman and wandered in the direction of the bookshelves, feeling the ghostlike texture of Pitch's lips against his fingers.

Behind him, Pitch stood up and dropped the book he was reading quietly onto the stack. Jack didn't look over his shoulder, could feel his heart racing.

'You know, don't you?' Jack said, wanting to run his fingertips along the spines of books and not daring.

'The fears you have that are connected to me are always easier to read,' Pitch said quietly.

'What do you know?' Jack said, knocking his staff against part of the bookshelf and icing it to distract himself from the knowledge that Pitch was standing behind him. He was asking that question a lot lately, but this time it meant something different.

'You want, but you are afraid of wanting. You come forward but you are afraid of staying. Still frightened that I will reject you. More frightened of yourself, of the unknown. Afraid of your fear.'

Jack shivered to hear it all. It didn't help defuse the fears, but hearing them from Pitch gave him a space where he could corral them together.

'I'm also afraid of your fear,' Pitch said, walking closer, pausing when Jack tensed.

'What else?' Jack said, turning around and facing him.

'What else?' Pitch echoed, and looked up briefly, brow furrowing. He looked back down and took another step forwards, then another, stopping when only a few feet separated them. 'I fear the unknown in this also. Not knowing what will push you away. Uncertain that I will do something and you will not be able to bear it, not just once, but for some time. I am concerned that you will push yourself out of shame and anger and guilt, instead of want and lust.'

'Concern isn't fear,' Jack said and Pitch nodded a quick acknowledgement.

'It can be very like fear.'

'Why do you read all the time?' Jack said, desperate for a change of subject.

Pitch looked at the stack of books he'd been working his way through and then looked back at Jack.

'Once, when times were different, I used to shun reading unless it was strategy or battle-related. Now I find it quite calming.'

Jack thought about North talking about how much Pitch relied on an appearance of self-control in order to keep himself in check. He wondered how often Pitch's thoughts ran dark, how hard it was to keep himself balanced in the everyday. He meditated with his journal, he wrote out aspects of his past, he read to calm himself, he thought before he spoke. But Jack could see the instability beneath. It didn't bother him as much as it probably bothered the others. He could survive the fear trick. Pitch's threats that he wanted to do terrible things to Jack had – so far – remained only threats. The worst thing Pitch had done was leave, and he did that to save him.

Jack floated forwards and looked up at Pitch and then swallowed. He was close enough to touch, but he couldn't touch. He ached for it to be like it was, but it wasn't.

'I'm doing that meeting again,' Jack said, swallowing. 'This time just with Gwyn and Ash.'

Pitch's teeth ground together, Jack could see the muscles working in his jaw.

'I'd rather you didn't,' Pitch said, and Jack nodded.

'Me too. But Gwyn thinks it'll help.'

'I'm coming,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head. Pitch's eyes widened in indignation, and he frowned. 'I *am*.'

‘You can’t though,’ Jack said. ‘It’s going to be hard enough as it is.’

Pitch opened his mouth to protest and then closed his eyes. His head lowered as though weary. Jack resisted the urge to touch his hairline, and then realised he didn’t have to resist. He reached up and pressed his fingertips to Pitch’s hot brow. Pitch looked up and Jack withdrew his hand.

‘It is *shameful*,’ Pitch said, ‘how much I wish to slip into denial about all you have experienced. I receive the evidence of your fears regularly, intrusively, and instead of being a pillar of strength for you as I wish to be- I still dream of you being taken by the shadows, and you have moved on because you have suffered so *many* nightmares since. I wasn’t there for you then, I want to be now.’

Jack turned Pitch’s words over in his mind. He didn’t quite know how to accept Pitch into his life anymore. Not with so much of the connection being touched by fear. Even though Gwyn’s words about being a warrior in this stayed with him, he still wanted it to be easier. He was angry that it wasn’t.

‘I just don’t know why, on top of everything else, this has to be so hard,’ Jack said, and then laughed darkly. ‘Like could I complain more? It’s just-’

‘-Harder,’ Pitch said, sighing. ‘It’s normal, Jack.’

‘Nothing about this is normal,’ Jack said, and Pitch shifted, reached forward with his hand and then offered it palm up. Jack slid his fingers into Pitch’s palm and loosely held it, finding an anchor in the touch.

‘Nothing about what happened to you is normal. But, Jack, your responses are normal. You are having a reasonable reaction to unreasonable events. It’s not the other way around.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes and Pitch smirked.

‘And so we prove that denial really *isn’t* just a river in Egypt.’

Jack’s eyes widened in disbelief. He snorted before he could help himself and his fingers tightened on Pitch’s hand automatically.

‘You think you’re funny, don’t you?’

‘It’s actually a *terrible* pun,’ Pitch said, and then his face shifted, became more promising, a half-smile turning his face dangerous. ‘I want you to kiss me again. Now. If you will.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, ‘But-’

‘I miss the way you taste,’ Pitch breathed. ‘I miss your tongue, the shape of your teeth, how you smell of the promise of snow. If you are going to this meeting without me, perhaps you might want to consider showing me how capable you are.’

‘I don’t have to prove myself to you,’ Jack said, and Pitch’s fingers curled around Jack’s hand properly and he pulled Jack forwards.

‘I want you to,’ Pitch said. ‘If this is all I can have, then *let* me.’

Jack shook his hand out of Pitch’s, wanting his fingers free. The way his heart lurched was almost familiar now. Beneath the apprehension, he wanted Pitch. There was a time when he thought he’d never feel cold again because of Pitch, when he’d had to lie in the snow because Pitch had spent so

long showing him how much he wanted him, Jack had started to think he mattered.

Jack curled his hand behind Pitch's neck, let cool fingers slip around the furnace of warmth beneath the collar of his robe.

'I like it more when you're in control,' Jack said, and Pitch took a sudden, deep breath.

'I will take what I can get,' Pitch said, 'but believe me when I say that having you beneath me is an addiction I don't plan on giving up.'

Jack swallowed hard at the coil of sensation that shot up his spine at those words. He closed his eyes, leaned his head forward until his forehead was brushing against Pitch's shoulder. Alongside the bolt of sensation, a spike of dread so sudden that even Pitch made a small, distressed sound.

'Jack...'

'No,' Jack said quickly. 'No, it's okay, it's just- Maybe that's a little while off. I want it but-'

'No expectations, please. You're not obligated to me, nor I to you. No, don't look at me like that, you are *not*.'

Jack looked sideways. He realised that he was absently scraping at the back of Pitch's neck, fretting without realising. He slowed the motion and looked back.

'I want it to be in Kostroma,' Jack said. 'When that happens.'

Pitch closed his eyes.

'I thought you didn't want me back in Kostroma,' Pitch said, and Jack laughed bitterly.

'I didn't want you there on your own, but...if I could be there too, and you didn't mind, then maybe...'

'You shocked me, that day,' Pitch said quietly. 'I was lost in my own mind when I first asked to go back to Kostroma. Not only that, but I couldn't read your fears properly, and sometimes it seemed like you cared less. I know that's not the case now.'

'I hate that scarf,' Jack said, and Pitch smiled sadly.

'I hate it too. But it's gone now.'

'I didn't care less,' Jack said, frowning. 'I...'

'I know,' Pitch said, 'I know that now.'

'You came back and thought I cared *less*?' Jack's face twisted when he realised how hard that must have been for him. Pitch would have remembered being the Nightmare King, perhaps he feared that he'd lost Jack because of it. Makara said the scarf was extensive, but he hadn't realised how much Makara's magic would disconnect Pitch so much from the world around him.

Jack flinched when Pitch raised his other hand to Jack's face. Pitch paused, waited a few seconds, and then continued, pressing the back of his hand to Jack's cheek. His hand was large and warm and familiar, and for the briefest of seconds Jack wanted to turn his face towards it and kiss the back of Pitch's knuckles.

'So we just kind of pick up where we left off?' Jack said, wondering at the golden irises of Pitch's



eyes, how hypnotic they were. Eyes that had likely caused grown warriors to freeze in terror, even before there had ever been the promise of a Nightmare King.

‘Is that what you want?’ Pitch said, and Jack turned his cheek into Pitch’s hand, heard the way his breath was shaking.

‘I want our thing back,’ Jack said, and Pitch laughed softly.

‘*Thing*. So eloquent. So articulate.’

‘Do we have our thing again?’ Jack said, and Pitch shifted his hand minutely, a fraction of movement across Jack’s skin. Jack’s pulse thumped away in his neck. He had always been sensitive to touch, always, but never like *this*. How was it that he could go hundreds of years with no gentleness and be more sensitive to it than he was before?

‘We’ve both said that we love each other,’ Pitch said, ‘And were it not for the unfortunate terror you harbour within, I daresay we would have *jumped* each other by now. Hm?’

Jack snickered, he couldn’t help it. It was true.

‘So we have a thing,’ Jack said, and Pitch turned his hand so slowly on Jack’s skin, that he could feel the way the texture changed from the smooth dryness of the back of his hand, to the slight callous on the edge of his palm where he’d wielded a sword for so long, to the textured mix of soft and calloused on the inside of his hand where it cradled his cheek. Fingertips rested delicately against his temple, thumb on his cheekbone.

‘I asked you to kiss me, and you still haven’t listened. I’m beginning to think you just don’t want to,’ Pitch said, and Jack rolled his eyes at the joking he heard in that tone of voice, in the indulgence.

Jack floated forwards and took a deep, shaking breath.

He leaned in close, closer, until he was breathing against Pitch’s mouth. He stared at Pitch and then closed his eyes, heart pounding, trying to remind himself that he had to be a warrior, because this was something he *wanted*, and so-

‘Kiss me,’ Jack breathed, hating how nervous he sounded.

‘Are you sure?’ Pitch said, voice even, dark. Hand shifting across his face and feathering into the small wisps of hair by his ear. Jack shivered.

‘Please,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t know if I can. Just...try.’

‘When you ask so sweetly...’

Jack whimpered when Pitch pressed his lips against Jack’s. He opened his mouth without thinking, and Pitch opened his mouth in turn. They hesitated, then Pitch licked his way into Jack’s mouth. Jack clutched at his robe, feeling like he was tumbling through the air without his staff, branded with warmth, surrounded, *overwhelmed*-

Jack flew backwards quickly, gasping. There was another time when his mouth had been full, there had been warmth, he had been overwhelmed, he couldn’t get *away*. He pressed his hand over his mouth and made a sound that was revulsion, shame, frustration.

‘I don’t want it to be like this!’ he shouted, and then risked looking up at Pitch.

'It won't always be like this,' Pitch said, resolute. He looked sad, however, and he closed his eyes a moment later. 'It won't.'

'I want to try again,' Jack said immediately, and Pitch shook his head.

'And now you will force yourself, because of shame, and fear, and *doubt*. I cannot have that. I won't. You come to me with want and we will try whatever you wish. But if you come to me with the intention of merely-

'I do want it,' Jack said, and Pitch opened his eyes and nodded slowly.

'In this moment, right now, *what* do you want?'

Jack opened his mouth to say that he wanted to try again, but something about the serious look on Pitch's face, the direct gaze, made him think. He searched inside himself, through the fear and the memory he was trying not to think about, and he lowered his feet to the ground and leaned on his staff. He needed a break.

'Later, then,' Jack said, heavily.

'I do hope that Gwyn's plan involves violence. Perhaps I can put in a special request,' Pitch said, and Jack sighed out some tension.

'Well, you've got that giant battleaxe that you *hate so much*, after all, why not put it to good use?'

'Why not, indeed?' Pitch said, half-smiling.

Jack's thoughts drifted towards whatever Gwyn might be planning, and then the meeting that Gwyn wanted him to have with Ash. He was surprised that Ash had even agreed to it, after the last time.

'I don't know what he has planned,' Jack said. 'Not exactly.'

'Gwyn doesn't like to reveal all the elements in a plan until he's almost certain they will work. It was impressive that he was able to organise the retaliation against Augus when he moved against the primary schools; sudden, impromptu action isn't his style. We've discussed strategy before, when he was learning to make the light; Gwyn prefers to play a very long game.'

'Do you think he can do it? Come up with something to...defeat him?'

'I think he already has,' Pitch said matter-of-factly. 'Now I think we wait to see what that is, and if it will be successful. If it is, I will take him aside afterwards and congratulate him on a job well done, and then have words with him about how he's used you.'

'Yeah, I'm going to stay out of that. I still kind of like him, you know? But hey, who knows, after this meeting that might all be really different.'

*Because he's still also kind of a dick*, Jack thought.

'Come back to me,' Pitch said, watching Jack closely. 'After the meeting. If you feel trapped and flee first, then by all means, do that. But come back to me.'

'I will,' Jack said, wishing Pitch hadn't reminded him about it, wishing that he'd never agreed to it. But he would do anything to make sure Augus was defeated, so he had to go to the meeting. He had to at least *try*.

‘Good,’ Pitch said.

\*

Another forest. Jack wasn’t sure where Gwyn found them all. He seemed to be remarkably familiar with any otherworld forest that he found himself in. There was another tent, this one not torn to shreds by Jack’s frost. Gwyn was intent on creating the same boundaries as last time, and – not distracted by Pitch’s pacing this time around, and not wanting to think about his own curdling fear – Jack watched Gwyn work the boundary magic. When he was done, he tested the entire perimeter, running his hand along it, pausing and strengthening certain areas. Jack couldn’t really see the energy, except when Gwyn added to it and it shimmered briefly.

Afterwards, Gwyn went to the tent and beckoned Jack over. They entered, and Jack was surprised to see whiskey on a wooden table, three shot glasses. The interior was actually decorated this time. There were rugs on the ground, a small pit where a little fire burned.

‘Is the fire going to be a problem?’ Gwyn said, and Jack shook his head.

‘Not if it stays like this. If it gets much warmer, I’ll find it hard to concentrate.’

‘It won’t get warmer than this,’ Gwyn said, and then ran a hand through his hair. ‘Right. This-’

‘You’re *nervous*,’ Jack said, pointing at him with his staff.

The look that Gwyn gave him, narrow-eyed and lowered eyebrows, seemed to say: *I’m allowed*.

‘I’ll be using the Dra’ocht again,’ Gwyn warned. ‘You react quite badly to Gulvi’s energy in particular, so I’m hoping that with her absent, you’ll find it tolerable. Ash will be wary, he doesn’t trust me, and you must remember that the *only* reason he is here is to make sure his brother is looked after. He’s not interested in August’s defeat, and if he can see a way to stop his brother from his current path without removing him from the throne, that’s what he’ll angle for. You must be prepared for Ash’s love for his brother, do you understand?’

‘Big surprise that Ash doesn’t trust you,’ Jack said.

‘He calls people buddy, and friend, often without thinking about it. It’s not intended as an insult, it’s the side effect of centuries spent in bars and public houses and other similar establishments. Ultimately Ash just wants to get along with everyone, including *you*. He has a capacity for empathy that is broad and generous, which-’

‘I doubt that. How would he put up with what August is doing, if he did?’

‘That’s why he *can*,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s why what we’re doing has a chance of working. Ultimately, Jack, though I need you, this – tonight – isn’t about you. This is about Ash and August.’

‘I don’t know if I can talk about it. You can’t gloss over that and pretend like it’ll just happen because-’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘I understand.’

Gwyn straightened and looked quickly to the side, as though he could see through the tent entrance. Jack wanted to ask him how he did that, but then he scented it himself. The wind brought him an odour of silt and fresh water, of the deep green of lakes. It was horribly familiar. Jack pressed a hand over his nose and mouth. Gwyn turned back and shook his head sharply.

'It's Ash, not August. I assure you.'

'I know. It's different,' Jack said. 'Slightly.'

Gwyn pursed his lips as he watched Jack, and frowned. He looked like he wanted to say something, but after a few seconds he looked down at the ground and Jack felt his Dra'ocht. It was like looking at a stranger. Gwyn didn't have charisma, Jack knew that now, but he could *feel* it all the same.

Jack wondered if Gwyn had always been able to do that, and how many people had been manipulated by it.

Probably a lot.

Gwyn exited and Jack sat down at the chair Gwyn pointed to as he left. He held onto his staff and stared at the whiskey bottle. There was a glass intended for him. He'd never had whiskey. He didn't think he was going to start now.

Jack looked up when the tent flap opened. Ash entered first. He offered a small, forced smile to Jack, and then his eyes widened when he saw the whiskey, the shot glasses, the fire. He laughed.

'Trying much?' Ash said over his shoulder, and Gwyn breathed laughter. The glamour made it sound easy, relaxed. Jack knew it wasn't.

'Let's not pretend that this isn't important to me, too,' Gwyn said, and Ash shrugged as he sat, pulling the whiskey bottle to himself straight away and finding it open. He took Gwyn's glass, and then placed his fingers at the base of Jack's, raising his eyebrows in a question. Jack nodded absently, and Ash poured him a shot, before pushing the glass back.

Jack couldn't look at him properly. He didn't touch the glass. He kept his free hand underneath the table, pressing up against the underside of the desk, where frost slowly spiralled out of him.

Ash shifted, sipped the whiskey. He smirked when Gwyn downed his glass at once.

'You get this kind of quality, and then you do that with it?' Ash said. Gwyn poured himself another glass. Ash turned to Jack, stared at him. Jack felt the weight of that gaze and his hand tightened on his staff. 'You gonna to try and kill me today?'

'He's not planning on it,' Gwyn said, and Ash held up a hand.

'Come on, man, let the kid speak for himself.' He turned back to Jack. 'Does he talk over you all the time? Never mind, I bet I know the answer to that. So, are you?'

'It's...no,' Jack said, and Ash sipped at his whiskey again.

'Good. So come on, tell me why I'm here already.'

'Worried about what August would say if he knew you were here?' Gwyn said quietly, and Ash drummed his fingers on the table.

'Don't fuck with me, Gwyn,' Ash said, voice hardening. 'Just don't. You have a thing you want to say, then say it.'

'What I want to know is why August didn't tell you that he assaulted Jack. Why that's been such a secret. Because it has been, hasn't it? Shouldn't you know when your brother is sexually assaulting

frost spirits?’

Ash stared at Gwyn, then stared at Jack.

Jack had taken his free hand away from the underside of the table and pressed it to the scars around his front. He couldn’t help it. This was it. They were actually talking about it. Gwyn had said ‘sexual assault,’ it was the first time he’d ever made it explicit. He had no idea how much Gwyn knew, because Jack had never told him any real details, but he had obviously figured enough out. In amongst his fear, Jack began to feel angry; then it disappeared like the flame of a candle. He realised that Gwyn – of all people – had never treated him differently. Had still treated him like a capable, if unruly and frustrating frost spirit, and trusted his judgement in the defeat of Pitch.

He wondered if Gwyn had far too much faith in him.

‘Augus...doesn’t do those things without permission,’ Ash said. ‘That’s not his kink, it’s *never* been-’

‘Look at him,’ Gwyn said. ‘Look at how he reacted to you last time, simply because you’re both related. Or you could just ask him. Gods only know you won’t listen to me.’

‘Hey,’ Ash said to Jack, ‘look at me.’

Jack forced himself to meet Ash’s hazel eyes, and was struck by the uncertain expression on his face. In a single moment he realised that Gwyn was right. Ash *cared* about people. He held his shot glass too tightly, he stared at Jack like he didn’t want it to be true.

‘There was...an attack,’ Jack said, looking down abruptly. ‘He threatened it months before. But...I didn’t, I mean, I just didn’t think...’

Jack laughed, because this was impossible, wasn’t it? He couldn’t talk about it with *anyone*.

‘There was an attack,’ Jack whispered.

‘Did you provoke him?’ Ash said, and Jack laughed bitterly.

‘It was an ambush,’ Gwyn said. ‘Jack was weak, dying, and his frost was running out. He has scars. And not the scars of someone who gave permission, Ash. He has the bite of a waterhorse on his side.’

Ash’s breathing hissed on a sharp inhale and then he shook his head.

‘No. Whatever you’re getting at, whatever you’re twisting into being, I won’t-’

‘Show him,’ Gwyn said to Jack, and Jack looked up at Gwyn in horror. There was *no way* he would lift his sweatshirt up in front of these two fae, there was no way he would reveal the mess of scarring across his ribs. He didn’t care how much it would help. He felt paralysed.

‘Yeah,’ Ash laughed, the sound brittle. ‘*Show me.*’

He hadn’t known, had he? He hadn’t known that Ash could also do the compulsions. It made sense, somewhere in amongst the sudden peak of horror so huge he could taste it in his throat. It made *sense*. They were *related*.

Before he could make more than a whimpering sound of distress, he was standing. His hands were already at the hem of his sweatshirt, already pulling it up.

Jack's mind began to blank, the room went grey at the edges. He wanted to laugh hysterically. He was going to pass out.

Gwyn stood up so quickly that his chair fell over with a dull thud. He knocked the whiskey bottle over as he moved quickly around the table, and alcohol spilled a thick, muddy scent into the air.

'Release him from it!' Gwyn shouted, but Ash was staring at the jagged row of tooth-marks on the front of Jack's torso. Some were neat, but those in the middle were widened and thicker, where August had dug his fingers in and deliberately opened the wound. '*Ash!*'

'Fuck,' Ash said, staring at Jack, face paler than before. 'Yeah, of course. Stop, ignore what I just said.'

Jack was embarrassed to hear the long, broken sound that emerged from his stoppered throat as the compulsion washed away. He fell to his knees beside the chair and didn't remember dropping his staff. He tugged his sweatshirt down hard and bent over himself, trying to gather his breathing. He made a strangled sound when he felt a hand on his back. The hand jerked away.

'Jack,' Gwyn said, 'Jack, I-'

'Did you plan this?' Jack said, ignoring Ash. He *hated* those compulsions. August had made his mind into his own tool, made it impossible to fight back as he used Jack as a plaything, then taunted him for not resisting. Jack made a choked sound.

'Did you?' Ash said, voice shaky. 'Did you want me to use my compulsion against him? And Jack...Jesus, fuck, you're serious aren't you? That's not...that's not August's style. That's-'

'You recognise his bite?' Gwyn said grimly, and Jack dug his fingernails into his palms when he realised that Gwyn hadn't answered the other question.

'Of course I fucking do. But this isn't like August, it's not-'

'I assure you, it happened,' Gwyn said.

Jack's ribs felt like they were on fire. His neck burnt where the necklace had cut in. His back throbbed. His head felt too small for the chaos inside of it. He wanted Pitch. He struggled to remind himself that this wasn't like last time: Pitch wasn't a Nightmare King, he was back in the Workshop, waiting for him.

Jack pushed himself upright clumsily and braced himself on his chair. He just wanted to *forget*.

'Hey, Jack, buddy, are you alright?' Ash, of all people, asking if he was okay. Jack wanted to laugh.

'Is August?' Gwyn said, and Jack looked over just as Ash swallowed his shot of whiskey at once and stared at the empty bottle and the spilled drink with something like regret.

'This isn't like him,' Ash said. 'Look, yeah, sometimes August plays with his food. We're waterhorses, some of us do that. But a frost spirit isn't food. It's...'

Gwyn nodded.

'Is it like the shadows?'

'He doesn't have any,' Jack said absently, and Ash looked over quickly. Jack pressed his forehead

to the table as he sat down again, blocking both of the older fae out of his line of sight. 'When he visited Pitch and I in Kostroma, Pitch attacked him with the golden light. It passed straight through him. Augus laughed and said he didn't have any of the shadows with him.'

'No, he doesn't, does he?' Gwyn said, 'Still, after all this time? Worrying, isn't it? How much do you actually know about your brother, these days?'

'So he's been a bit more ruthless since becoming King. He's not the only one, Gwyn. Come on, man, let's be serious here.'

Jack listened, but also wondered at the fact that Augus never seemed to use the living shadows. For all that he had taken them from the Nightmare King, for all that he had directed others to use them, he'd always avoided them. Why wouldn't he use such a powerful tool?

Was it the shadows themselves? Was there something about them he didn't like?

And he had gone to visit Makara hadn't he? For a scarf to hide something from the Nightmare King?

Jack narrowed his eyes. There was something there, but he couldn't see it properly.

'You've been growing increasingly distant – Augus and yourself – since before he became King, have you not? Perhaps he was trying to hide this side of himself from you in order to protect you. He has always been the protective older brother. Maybe he didn't want you to know his proclivities, his tastes, ran in such a dark direction.'

'No, no, you can't play this fucking game with me, asshole. If he's done this – *if* – he had a reason. I-'

'*If*?' Gwyn said, laughing. 'Do you want to see the scars again? You recognised his bite, you saw how Jack reacted to a simple compulsion. Tell me that's Augus' usual modus operandi and perhaps I'll believe you.'

Ash didn't answer, and Jack finally lifted his head off the table, feeling dizzy. He reminded himself over and over that Pitch was back at the Workshop, waiting for him.

'If he had a reason, wouldn't he have told his Court about it? This is what I keep coming up against when I think about it myself, Ash. Why destabilise Jack, and then keep it a secret from you all? He compelled Jack to tell the Nightmare King, but he *knows* I can break a compulsion. Did he even expect it to work? Perhaps he thought you wouldn't approve of his methods. Perhaps he is exercising a personal vendetta that he has been keeping from you?'

'Yeah, against the Nightmare King? You want to talk about evil? You did all of us a favour, getting rid of him. Augus most of all.'

Jack looked over and Ash smiled humourlessly.

'You keep strange bedfellows, that's for sure,' Ash said to him.

'Pitch and the Nightmare King aren't the same,' Jack said, and Ash raised his eyebrows.

'That so? Whatever. So-'

'It *is* personal,' Gwyn said, staring at Ash. 'He has no master plan anymore, does he? He's just chaos, at this point. He will destroy the Kingdoms. An Unseelie King with that much power?'

Augus with that much power? He doesn't need an Inner Court, he could do it on his own. No wonder you're so concerned for him. I am, also. We were friends once, after all, he and I. And we have a problem. We have a severely destabilised Unseelie Court. We have disenfranchised Unseelie fae. They need a King or Queen they can believe in, Ash. Someone who already holds a great deal of power; power over Augus.'

Ash startled. He stared at Gwyn in disbelief.

'No. Seriously? Are you saying what I think you're saying? Are you joking? Jesus, you're not joking, are you? Fuck,' Ash pressed his thumbs into the space above his eyes, groaned. 'Fuck, I need a drink.'

Gwyn got up and retrieved a second bottle from a small sack in the corner of the tent. He opened it calmly and poured Ash another glass.

Ash downed it in one go.

'Such a waste of good whiskey,' Gwyn commented, and Ash laughed.

'You're insane. You think-'

'You're already a member of the Unseelie Inner Court. You are beloved by both the Seelie and the Unseelie. They would vote for you.'

'You're forgetting the small fact that my life is mostly going to bars, fucking, and hanging out with Gulvi. It's not politics. It's never, *ever* been politics.'

'Then you will just need to make sure that Gulvi is a part of your Inner Court. I can assure you, she is willing.'

Ash pushed his chair backwards and Jack could tell he was getting close to simply bolting. There was a look of stunned betrayal on his face. In that moment, Jack felt a strange connection between them both.

'You've been talking to Gulvi about this? For how long? How long!?'

'We're not you, Ash. We weren't raised by him. We weren't looked after by him. Gulvi has had sisters wither away. Fae have been dying. He needs – for his own safety and the safety of the Kingdoms – to be curtailed. You wouldn't be here if you didn't *know* that. Don't you want your brother back? Because I can assure you, it would benefit *both* Kingdoms if that was achieved.'

'Back for how long before you killed him?' Ash said, digging his fingers into his jeans.

'I said I would not,' Gwyn said, and Ash's mouth slanted into a mirthless smile.

'Gwyn, mate, unless you blood-oath that you're not gonna kill him, and I mean this in the nicest of ways – go fuck yourself.'

'Perhaps it wouldn't have to be that way,' Gwyn said. 'Perhaps I could cede him to the Unseelie Court, particularly if it was ruled by someone I could trust. You could imprison him there. If you were King, you could be sure he was never harmed by the *many* fae that want revenge against him. And you know that he is vulnerable to this, now. That he has made too many enemies to ever be safe again.'

Ash stood up, his chest was heaving. He stared at Jack as though remembering he was there, and



then his face twisted in anguish.

'I'm not listening to this. I can't. You know, Augus always told me to watch out for you, and he was *right*.'

Gwyn stood up, face determined, eyes flinty.

'He *was* right, Ash. I'm going to do this with or without you. With you, this can go better for your brother. Without you- Don't underestimate what I will do to bring the Courts back under control again. To bring *peace* to the Kingdoms.'

'Oh,' Ash breathed, 'you really take after your father, don't you? Dude, I...'

'Consider my words,' Gwyn said. 'Ash, consider them well.'

'Yeah,' Ash said, looking at Gwyn as though he was a venomous creature. He turned to Jack and sighed. 'Well, can't say it was particularly nice meeting you, but good to know you're not as much about the murder and destruction as I thought you were. Good times.'

As Ash exited the tent, Gwyn called after him ominously;

'I'll be in touch.'

Ash didn't reply.

Jack gritted out a small, pained sound and tilted his staff against the table so he could wrap both of his hands around his ribs. He felt terrible. He could still feel the aftershock of the compulsion.

Gwyn pulled a chair over. Jack shook his head.

'You did very well,' Gwyn said, and then he took a deep breath. 'You won't believe me, and that is to be expected, but I did not expect him to use compulsion against you. He's not known for it.'

'How did you know it was sexual assault?' Jack said, wishing that his voice would stop shaking.

'Because Augus would know how to use it as a weapon,' Gwyn said. 'Because, Jack, you didn't see yourself when you came out of the lake, but I did.'

'Hardly anything happened though,' Jack said, and Gwyn nodded. He was the first person not to contradict Jack on the matter, and Jack couldn't tell if he was thankful, or hurt.

'He didn't have a great deal of time, thank goodness. Whatever he did, I expect it was not the full extent of what he wanted to execute, yes? You didn't know that I knew?'

'You never brought it up,' Jack said, and Gwyn laced his fingers together.

'You didn't want me to.'

'I still don't. You only bring it up when it's convenient. Otherwise what, it's just- I don't understand you at all.'

'It's a reminder that I failed you,' Gwyn said, and Jack looked up, surprised. Gwyn frowned. 'Contrary to what you think of me, I have my own sense of that event, and the matters at hand.'

'But you didn't know he was there.'

'I should have,' Gwyn said. 'At the very least, I should have put aside my interest in the new weapons for long enough to realise that I didn't know the terrain well enough. If I had known there were any lakes nearby, I wouldn't have asked you to scout on your own.'

'Is this a game? Right now? Are you playing me? Trying to get me to feel sorry for you, so that I stay on your side after watching you manipulate the hell out of Ash? Out of me?'

Gwyn stood up abruptly and picked up the whiskey bottle. He turned away from Jack and drank directly out of it, and then set it down onto the table with too much force. He didn't look at Jack again as he started packing up the tent. He didn't ask for help, which Jack was used to. Every night on the mountain, Gwyn had set up his own camp and packed it up again with nary a word.

'At least it worked,' Gwyn said, voice stiff, minutes later.

'What?'

'It worked. The meeting. Ash will be back, he'll be receptive. It's just a matter of waiting now.'

'Receptive to being King?'

'Receptive to getting August back under control.'

'And how are you going to do that, anyway?' Jack said, and Gwyn turned back to Jack, pensive.

'We're going to do what he did to us. We're going to use the shadows against him. He hates them far more than we ever did, you know. I'm not entirely sure why, only that it is likely connected to that history that you've mentioned; between he and the Nightmare King. It doesn't matter where it comes from. It only matters what we do with it.'

'Assuming he hates them,' Jack said, and Gwyn looked down at the sack he was holding.

'When Ash returns, I'll confirm it, but I'm certain from some of Ash's reactions tonight that I'm correct.'

Jack watched him continue working and wanted to apologise. He couldn't.

Pitch was waiting for him.

'I'm leaving now,' Jack said, and Gwyn looked at him, an unfathomable expression on his face. He didn't look happy that the meeting had gone to plan.

'I'll check in on you tomorrow. I'd like to see more of your frost in action, if I may.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, standing and walking towards the tent flap. 'Okay.'

'Jack,' Gwyn said, as Jack started to walk through it. Jack turned and looked back, but Gwyn only frowned, paused, then turned back to what he was doing. Jack thought there was something oddly lonely about him, then. For some reason he was reminded of Gwyn immediately after the nightmare he'd had on the mountain of the Glasera dwarves. He'd been shaken and alone, and it was difficult to see it for what it was, because he was the *King*, and because it was jarring to see.

Jack let the tent flap fall shut behind him and walked away. He didn't have the energy to deal with it.

He froze.

He was surprised to see Ash standing near the magical boundary that Gwyn had made. His shoulders were hunched, and he was smoking human cigarettes, wisps of smoke curling into the evening sky.

Jack walked over and Ash looked up at him.

'Your Nightmare King did this,' Ash said, and Jack shook his head.

'He's not my Nightmare King.'

'We're both just fucked then, you and I. Aren't we?'

There was an odd caustic bitterness to his voice, and Jack realised that Gwyn was right. Ash was considering everything he'd said. The meeting had worked. Ash dropped the cigarette butt and squashed it into the ground with his boot before immediately drawing out another and lighting it up with a red lighter from his pocket.

'He really hurt you, didn't he?' Ash said, after his first drag on the filter. 'August.'

'I...'

'No one's gonna remember him the way he was,' Ash said, and Jack realised his fingers were shaking. 'No one. Maybe no one should. Fuck, I don't know. He never told me what happened, back then. He never told me what it was like, between him and the Nightmare King. I only knew that one day something changed, and he wasn't the same anymore. August never used to have nightmares like that, you know? And then, you know, the Nightmare King came back, came into our Court, and- You fucking keep your not-Nightmare-King away from me. I will fuck him up.'

'He's not the same,' Jack said, heart thumping up in his throat. Pitch was in the Workshop, he wasn't the Nightmare King. The Nightmare King had been defeated. He was *gone*.

'Jesus, we're both just screwed. You got caught up in this riptide, didn't you? And fuck me, I know a crossfire when I'm caught in one.'

'I'm sorry,' Jack said automatically, and Ash laughed.

'Me too. Me fucking too.'

Jack stood by him until Ash finished his cigarette. They exchanged a long look, and Jack wished that it was harder to identify with Ash. Wished he didn't see an individual who was just as caught up in this war as Jack was.

Jack flew up and away into the sky. Pitch was back at the Workshop. Pitch was waiting for him.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'An Unwanted Discovery in Kostroma,' Pitch finds out about the kiss that happened between Gwyn and Jack. North and Jack have another talk. And Jack and Pitch head back to Kostroma, with disastrous results, kicking off the last half of this book and Pitch's storyline.

# An Unwanted Discovery in Kostroma

## Chapter Notes

We're entering the second half of the story now (well, we entered that about two chapters ago). It's kind of incredible that you guys have followed me this far, and I hope I can make here on out good for everyone. Your feedback is always incredible, the kudos and bookmarks and subscriptions are just - I have no words. And I have to say an additional thanks for the comments themselves, those of you who comment just get an extra special squish. This is nothing against the lurkers or people who don't have time, since all of you guys are so fantastic. The comments really help keep me focused and on point. <3 THANK YOU. For those who can't comment: THANK YOU. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pitch already sitting upright, alert, when Jack entered his room. Jack had no idea what he was broadcasting. He felt less panicked than before. Talking with Ash had helped somehow. But on the flight home, his mind had reminded him over and over again how much he hated compulsions, and the nausea that followed left him feeling sick.

‘What can I do?’ Pitch said. Jack closed the door behind him, plunging the room back into darkness. He didn’t want to see anything. Pitch’s night vision might be perfect, but Jack wanted shadows and only the light from outside the window and glowing golden eyes.

‘I’m really glad you’re here,’ Jack said, and realised how lifeless his voice sounded. He made a small sound in the back of his throat. ‘Like, really glad.’

‘You sound it,’ Pitch said, and Jack exhaled on a rush. It was all he had left for laughter.

‘Compulsions,’ Jack said, ‘I hate them.’

‘Do you?’ Pitch said, then stood, stepped closer. Jack got the impression that Pitch peered at him closely. Jack didn’t care. He dropped his staff onto the bed. If he held on, frost lightning would careen out of him and he’d end up destroying Pitch’s room. ‘Meeting went well then?’

‘I actually think it was an accident. Gwyn said Ash doesn’t usually do it. I don’t know what to believe.’

‘He doesn’t. In the research I’ve done since, he’s known for not using them,’ Pitch said.

Jack stepped closer to Pitch. On his flight home, he’d constantly reminded himself that Pitch was in the Workshop. But alongside it, a tiny voice had reminded him that Pitch had been gone for a *long* time. And the last time Jack had felt shattered by a compulsion; there was no one there for him to return to.

‘I hate them,’ Jack said. ‘Why can’t I fight them?’

He stopped within arm’s reach of Pitch, then took another step.

‘Why?’ Jack said. ‘Do you know? You said fear helps break them, but it didn’t. It doesn’t.’

Pitch stared, wide-eyed. Jack could tell because he could see more of Pitch's irises. Jack took another step, aimed sideways so that he could lean his forehead into Pitch's shoulder.

'Gwyn has a theory, about that,' Pitch said, and it sounded like he was forcing his voice to evenness. Jack's forehead furrowed when he felt tentative fingers curl around his upper arm. It was only one hand, he could still escape if he needed to. Talking with Ash had smoothed something brittle inside of him. Maybe it was the relief of knowing he wasn't the only one stuck between a rock and a hard place.

'A theory, huh?' Jack said, and he felt Pitch nod.

'He knows of the way you died. At least, he knows that you were frozen underwater, in a forest, for some time. He says that particular forest was known for enchantments, for being inhabited by a rich number of fae. And he thinks that spending years frozen underwater, preserved, made you vulnerable to the magic that was nearby. Gwyn speculated that if the Tsar Lunanoff hadn't chosen you, in a few centuries you may have emerged on your own, one of those rare breeds of fae that start off as human and then – through the nature of their death – transform into fae. He believes that because your transformation was halted early, prematurely, your natural resistance to the glamour never built up over time.'

'Wait, what?' Jack turned his head sideways, leaned his head against Pitch's chest. 'There are fae that started off as human?'

'Mm, like the Rusalka. You didn't know? The Tsar Lunanoff made you powerful, but he also chose you at a time when you were vulnerable. I'm not sure you can grow it now – the resistance, or the potential for that resistance. It's why the glamour affects you so much.'

Pitch's hand curved up around Jack's shoulder and Jack sighed. He was tired. He could throw himself into sleep, in the mood he was in. Pitch took a deep breath, and then his hand tightened.

'Were there many compulsions?' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head because he didn't want to talk about it.

'Can we not?' Jack said, and Pitch sighed.

'It might help you.'

'I just want to stand here and be close to you, and not freak out. Okay?'

Pitch shifted, he seemed reluctant to let it go. But he didn't say anything else, and then his hand splayed underneath his hood, an intimate warmth. He pressed Jack closer, gently, and Jack placed his hands against Pitch's robe. The nightmares were staying away, for now.

'Gwyn wanted me to show him my scars, to prove that it happened.'

Pitch's hand twitched, he inhaled sharply.

'Scars? Plural?' Pitch said.

'Uh,' Jack pressed his forehead into Pitch's robes, wanted to disappear. How many was it now? Before Pitch had been taken again, it had only been the scar at his neck. And now he couldn't move at all without being aware that his back was a mess. The long scar from Pitch's sword. The bite marks. All of them still not quite settled on his skin. 'A few scars.'

Pitch's breathing became uneven, and Jack's hands tightened in the material of his robe.

‘You’re upset,’ Jack said, ‘I’ve upset you. Awesome.’

‘Jack-’

‘I mean, mostly it was because my powers were so low and I just wasn’t healing properly. And look they’re not that bad, I think, they’re just-’

‘*Jack*,’ Pitch said, ‘I don’t know whether I’m more bothered about the fact that you have multiple scars from events I still don’t know a great deal about, or the fact that you are trying to convince me that they’re not that bad. I’m almost *certain*, from what I know of you, that they’re shocking.’

Pitch’s hand smoothed over Jack’s shoulders. Jack shivered, but the numbness kept the worst of his fears at bay. A delicate warmth was spread, curling through his back, responding to the heat of Pitch’s hand.

‘Jack, were you still injured when I discovered the axe?’ Pitch said, voice careful.

Jack winced.

‘You didn’t know,’ Jack said, and Pitch’s other hand came up and almost, *almost* touched Jack’s hair, before shying away and resting on his upper arm. That Pitch couldn’t do what he wanted to do, that he couldn’t do what *Jack* wanted him to do, made his heart hurt.

‘Did I reinjure you?’

‘You didn’t know,’ Jack insisted. ‘And my healing was better. Actually, really, it wasn’t a problem, and- You’re guilt-tripping yourself right now, aren’t you? Pitch, you thought I cared less. You were...not really super sane or anything. So forget about it.’

Pitch cleared his throat, but didn’t say anything. A moment later he brought both hands up so that they crossed over Jack’s shoulders, and Jack realised that this was the first time he’d been held by someone properly in...

Jack felt weak. It had been a long time. He hadn’t wanted it after Pitch had been taken. He couldn’t have it after August captured him.

‘Don’t let me go,’ Jack whispered, and he winced when his voice was higher. ‘It’s just-’

Pitch’s arms tightened around him, and Jack hesitantly wound one of his arms around Pitch’s back. He was so warm, and Jack was so tired. He slumped a little, wanting to preserve the moment.

‘One day we will do this, and you won’t be so *scared* that it’s going to go away again,’ Pitch said.

‘Hey, it’s been a while,’ Jack said, and couldn’t believe how tired he must have been. It was as though his survival instincts had shut down. He could feel small bubbles of fear grow and burst inside of him, but they were distant. He could ignore them.

Jack wrapped his other arm around Pitch and squeezed. This was so new. It was new in a way that he had no comparison for. He couldn’t tell August that he loved it, because he’d hardly experienced it. August hadn’t been able to ruin it for him, which Jack was grateful for. He’d had hardly any time to really experience all the things he could have with Pitch; they’d only ever properly hugged once, and that was a time when Jack had been so distressed he could hardly think. Now, it was soothing. It was actually *helping*.

‘Don’t let go,’ Jack said again. ‘Just-’

Pitch's arms tightened around him. He buried his head in Jack's hair and Jack wanted to whimper because it felt so good. Then his hair shifted in a familiar, sickening way and he gasped and pushed backwards, away from Pitch's arms.

'Shit,' Jack managed, and raked at his scalp, trying to make the sensations go away. 'Shit, why *this*? Why?'

Pitch lowered his arms slowly, he walked over and sat on his own bed, trailing his hand along the blankets.

'You're making progress, Jack. You've just had a *terrible* evening, and you came back and sought out comfort. Tell me what that sounds like to you? If not progress, then what?'

'You must be so sick of it though. The fear. I can't help it. It's so *sudden*.'

'I will deal with my end of things, Jack. That's the way this goes. I'm not sick of you, and your fears are part of the package. They will, eventually, settle down again.'

Jack backed up until he could lean against the wall. He had a headache. He was tired, but he didn't want to sleep anymore. His eyes widened when Pitch yawned suddenly.

'When was the last time you slept?' he said. Pitch exhaled a single breath of laughter.

'I don't need you fussing over me. You're as bad as Toothiana.'

'Because you don't look after yourself. When was the last time you slept?' Jack said, stepping away from the wall.

'If I had *slept*, you would have come back from that meeting, seen me asleep, and left me alone. I know how you work, Jack. At least in this.'

'I...'

Jack felt a flush steal through him at the fact that Pitch had stayed up for him. Had waited.

'We have a thing,' Jack said quietly, reminding himself.

'Indeed.'

Jack's lips quirked up when he heard the smile in Pitch's voice.

'You think I'm making progress?' Jack said.

'I do.'

'It's just because I'm really tired,' Jack said, rubbing his hand over his face.

'Heaven forbid you actually *believe* you're making progress,' Pitch drawled, and then picked up Jack's staff and handed it to him.

'The meeting went well,' Jack said, answering one of Pitch's earlier questions. 'I mean, not so much for me, but in terms of...everything. It went the way it was supposed to. Do you really think Gwyn didn't know that Ash would use the compulsion? It seems like something Gwyn would plan.'

'Perhaps I'll ask him the next time I see him.'

‘Bring your axe,’ Jack said, and Pitch laughed. The sound was rich, unexpected. Jack wanted to hold it in his hands and hold it close to himself.

‘It is still there,’ Pitch said, and Jack blinked.

‘The axe?’

‘Your sense of fun,’ Pitch said, and Jack stilled, shocked. ‘It’s darker, and it’s...tangled, I think, with other things. But it is there.’

‘Darker, huh?’ Jack said, not sure if he believed Pitch. He remembered the feeling and the shape of fun, and he couldn’t identify either in himself anymore. ‘I bet you’re a fan of that.’

‘I *am*,’ Pitch said, and then stifled a yawn behind his hand.

‘Hey, will you get some sleep already?’ Jack said, smiling in spite of himself. Pitch finished yawning and sighed. His eyes were closed, Jack couldn’t see his irises anymore. He missed them. He hadn’t said it out loud, for fear of sounding like an idiot, but he thought that Pitch had nice eyes.

‘And what will you do?’ Pitch said, and Jack shrugged.

‘I’ll figure it out. Thanks though...for this.’

‘Don’t underestimate how much I receive from this, also,’ Pitch said, and Jack could hear the tiredness in his voice. It made his words deeper, thicker. Jack wondered how long it would take for Pitch’s energy levels to go back to normal. He still needed to sleep almost every night. It was the most obvious sign that being possessed by the shadows took a terrible physical toll.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, and then drummed his fingers on his staff and hopped up into the air. He gave Pitch a brief smile, which he knew he’d be able to see, before exiting the room and closing the door behind him. He felt strange. He could feel the ghost of August’s fingers in his hair, and the warmth of Pitch’s fingers clinging the space underneath his hood.

He couldn’t sleep with the memories so close to the surface. Not after the night he’d had. He’d have nightmares worse than last time.

Two hours later he crept back into Pitch’s room when he was fast asleep and curled up in the armchair, while Mora waited nearby. He flicked through some of the books Pitch had stacked nearby, but mostly he sat, lost in thought, and watched Pitch sleep.

\*

The next day, a fair weathered mid-afternoon, Pitch and Jack waited in North’s round table room for Gwyn to arrive. Pitch didn’t have his axe, despite them both joking about needing it again in the morning. Jack was appreciating those small moments of ease as they came, because he’d not had them for hundreds of years, because the hope of more of those moments gave him something to look forward to.

Pitch looked grim. Jack didn’t want to be in Gwyn’s shoes. Pitch, like Jack, had no fear of Gwyn or his position, not since they’d trained together. If Pitch wasn’t happy about something, he’d say so. Jack could look after himself, and he’d said as much. In response to that, Pitch had said:

‘I know you can look after yourself, it doesn’t mean I can’t remind Gwyn that I – too – used to run an army and remember what war was like. He must be careful what he sacrifices, and why.’



Jack looked up when Gwyn teleported into the room. Pitch's dark expression vanished when they both saw the expression on Gwyn's face.

'You look terrible,' Pitch said, flat.

Gwyn's mouth slanted up into something that might have been a smile, if there was any humour in it. Jack thought he looked worn, haggard even. There were lines under his eyes, and he wasn't carrying himself nearly as well as usual. The proud posture that Jack associated with him was gone. He looked exhausted. It was the first time he'd ever worn his armour like it was heavy.

'I had a long night,' Gwyn said, voice stripped of its usual strength. 'We lost three fae. Another is on death-watch right now.'

Gwyn paused and looked out of one of the arched windows, and then looked down at the floor.

'I'm on call, actually. If I hear the horn, I have to leave you. My apologies.'

'How many of those stupid horns are there?' Jack said, and Gwyn raised his eyebrows.

'Only three. One here, one now with the fae I have left watching over this one, and one spare. Usually all three are kept in the Court. I doubt they've ever been used so much.'

'Gwyn,' Jack said, 'we can do this on our own. I mean, you don't need to do this today. Why don't you go back?'

'I need...' Gwyn couldn't finish the sentence, looked as though he was searching for the right words.

'A break?' Pitch finished for him, and Gwyn nodded.

'Yes. I do not like being made to feel useless, and I understand perfectly well why they want me there, but watching fellow fae die- The *way* they're dying...'

'Seelie or Unseelie?' Pitch said, crisply, and Gwyn pursed his lips.

'Last night and today, Unseelie. We have created a space for them outside of the Seelie Court, since there is increased concern over spies and so forth; we can't let them into the Court proper. All they want is asylum. You know as well as I do that they can't change their alignment simply because they no longer believe in their King. There's nothing we can do for them except make them comfortable, but the wasting takes their mind, and Astor – a lake fae who was old when I was born – went mad last night before he passed. He almost took three of the volunteers with him.'

'You stopped him?' Pitch said, and Gwyn had a strange look in his eyes as he met Pitch's gaze.

'In the end, he had to be killed. In truth, it's why I'm leashed by the horn again. My presence during the death-watch is particularly required if the fae is powerful, and there is risk to the volunteers and the caretakers.'

'Wonderful,' Pitch drawled. Gwyn nodded slowly.

'Someone has to do it, and fae like Astor are too strong for many of the others.'

Gwyn subsided into silence and then pressed his hand to the back of his neck. He seemed distracted, and Jack wondered if he was waiting for the call of the horn, even now.

Jack looked over at Pitch, who was watching Gwyn closely. Pitch seemed to come to a decision,

and then he gestured at Jack to stand up.

Pitch led Jack and Gwyn out of the Workshop, past the training arena, near the ward boundary. The glare on the snow was high, but Jack noticed the other two didn't seem to be bothered by it, and snow glare had never been a problem for him. He dragged the crooked end of his staff along the snow, turning it to ice behind him.

'Still learning the lay of that axe, are you?' Gwyn said eventually, commenting on the absence of the weapon. Pitch rolled his eyes. 'It was the right weapon for you.'

'I beg to differ.'

'Do that,' Gwyn said abruptly. '*Use* it and you'll see that I'm right.'

'Do you know what *kind* of people used axes where I come from?' Pitch said, eyes narrowing, and Gwyn narrowed his eyes, a spark of life returning to his face.

'Are we where you came from? No. Are we *anywhere* near your homeland? No. You're here, and it's taken you this long and you still haven't truly accepted that. Your golden light, those living shadows, have irrevocably altered the balance of energies on this planet, but the rules and laws remain. One day you will have need of that axe, and you will suddenly understand what I had in mind when I chose it.'

'Tree-felling?'

Gwyn tried to maintain his serious expression, but failed. His eyes crinkled up in a smile that didn't make it to his lips.

'You will see,' he said. 'Battle, weapons, these things I know.'

'Let's not forget that I've helmed armies myself.'

'How long ago?' Gwyn said. 'I was doing it last week. You've been convalescing. Before that, were you helming armies? No. You were possessed by shadows and before *that*, possessed again.'

Pitch opened his mouth to retaliate, but then he closed his mouth and sighed.

'Your bluntness is always bracing. But you're correct. It's been some time.'

'I'm starting to see why you guys always invited me to training. I mean if it's just banter, I was clearly missing out,' Jack said, and Pitch and Gwyn both looked at him. Jack could have sworn they'd only just remembered he was there. 'Hey, well, I'll just leave you two to it, because I can't compete with all this talk about axes and who helmed what armies and stuff, and because-'

'Nice try,' Gwyn said, and Pitch smirked. Jack looked between them both and felt nervous laughter building up inside of him.

Gwyn suddenly stiffened and spun on his heel, eyes widening. Jack followed his gaze and saw nothing.

'The horn?' Pitch said, and Gwyn nodded, sheathed his sword and shook his head.

'I must attend this immediately. Jack, I still wish to see what you can do with your ice. We'll continue this some other time.'

'Fortune be with you,' Pitch said and Gwyn smiled stiffly. He opened his mouth to say something,

thought the better of it, and then melted away into splinters of light. Just like that, he was gone, and Pitch and Jack were alone outside.

‘He looked bad,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded. He trailed his booted foot through the snow and then sat down in it, scraping some up into one of his hands and letting it fall out again. Jack settled in front of him. Jack hoped everything would be okay, but he knew it probably wouldn’t be; those horns were only meant to be used in emergencies.

‘I believe he likes visiting this awful Workshop. We’re not a part of his Court, we’re not fae. I think he shows a side of himself here that he allows few others to see. What was it like, climbing the mountain with him?’

Jack rested his arm on his bent legs and then rested his chin on his arm. He shrugged.

‘A lot of walking. Like, a *lot*. He camped at the end of the day and I slept outside in the snow a lot of the time. He didn’t like me to go far though. At the beginning, we kept expecting an attack from the Nightmare King. We didn’t know, but your sword was keeping him away. We only found out once we’d given it to the Glasera. We sort of realised it in a crappy way.’

‘You mentioned a nightmare?’ Pitch said, expression closing off. Jack closed his eyes. It hadn’t been a good night for either Jack or Gwyn.

That was the night Gwyn had given him the barley sugar and told him that sugar could help. It was the night that-

Jack stiffened and then stared at Pitch.

‘Uh,’ Jack said, and Pitch raised his eyebrows.

‘Mm?’ Pitch said. ‘When you have that expression on your face, it’s always a cause for concern.’

‘Uh, it was a really bad night, and I did something kind of stupid?’ Jack said, and Pitch raised his hand, waved it nonchalantly.

‘We haven’t got all day. *Out* with it.’

‘We do kind of have all day,’ Jack said, and Pitch stared at him. ‘Okay, so, I was not in a good place when I woke up from the nightmare. I was kind of...missing you, a lot. I-’

‘You had a nightmare with the Nightmare King in it and your response was to *miss* me?’ Pitch said doubtfully and Jack laughed.

‘Well, yeah, I do actually think you’re both *different*. But he looked like you and he...he also kind of pretended to be you,’ Jack said. He shook his head as Pitch’s eyes widened in horror. ‘I figured it out pretty quickly. I mean, but, it was just...those first few minutes in the nightmare, I’d spent all this time not thinking about you and then...*anyway*. Anyway, I don’t want to talk about that. The point is that I missed you and Gwyn was messed up badly from whatever the Nightmare King had done to him and we kind of ended up sitting near each other and he had the Dra’ocht rolling off him and you *know* I’ve always been sensitive to that and I just wanted him to be you and then alright maybe I kissed him and freaked out about it and it hasn’t happened again since.’

Jack didn’t look up, refused to look up, but then seconds drifted into a minute, and then started to move into a second minute, and Jack couldn’t help himself. He looked up, flushed and frightened of what Pitch would do.

Pitch laughed. Jack realised it was genuine amusement he was seeing. Jack's arms dropped in shock and he leaned forwards. That was...not the reaction he'd been expecting.

'Jack, oh, you have a type, don't you? Is it that we're tall? Or war generals? Or something else?'

'What?' Jack said. 'Why aren't you angrier?'

'Why would I be angry?' Pitch said, looking bewildered. Realisation dawned on his features. 'Oh, did you expect me to have a standard, possessive, all too *human* reaction to this? You just listened to Gwyn tell me that I am far too attached to my homeland and my ways, and in many respects, he's correct.'

'But, you've been possessive in the past, and said I was...yours,' Jack stumbled over the word. He worried, for a second, that Pitch's relaxed posture meant that it was no longer true.

'You *are* mine,' Pitch said with a fierceness that changed his entire demeanour. Jack swallowed. 'It is a fact. But it's a fact that I know through your fears, Jack, not through my jealousy. You are mine not because I must mark you like my territory, like some dog, but because you declare yourself mine unconsciously, without thinking about it. And, Jack, if you could read my fears, you would know the same.'

Jack stared at him, and Pitch's mouth slanted into a half smile.

'I'm not *angry*. You were – from what I can gather – alone, dying, vulnerable, and as you said yourself Jack, missing *me*. Would it be better if I yelled at you? Belittled you? Made you feel bad? Should I attempt to act as though I can't read your fears, even *now*? That I might reject you over this? As if I could. If you must know, Gwyn told me soon after I was recovered.'

Jack fumbled his staff and it fell to the snow.

'He said that you were distraught,' Pitch continued, 'before, during, after. Jack, my only wish is that you had been able to find some succour. You didn't know I would be coming back. And I know the strength of your fears around this, you must have felt so...'

Pitch shook his head, unable to find the words.

'So have I disappointed you?' Pitch said finally, but there was an amused light in his eyes. Jack shook his head in wonder.

'You think I have a *type*?' he said suddenly, indignant, and Pitch laughed.

'I *know* you do. But that's a conversation for another day, I think.'

Jack glared. Pitch disarmed him with the way he spoke about things. For all that Pitch talked about Jack's openness; or for all that he'd used to, he was – himself – startlingly honest. There was a frankness about the things that he said. And in talking about Jack's fears the way he did, Jack couldn't help but think about that time, how it had been.

'I wanted him to be you, so badly,' Jack said.

Pitch shifted, and Jack raised himself up on his elbows only to see that Pitch was also lying down on the snow, staring up at the sky. He'd bent his legs, was resting his hands on his chest.

'How's that darkness of yours going?' Jack said, pushing himself upright and then floated to Pitch's side, settling next to him.

‘It’s still there,’ Pitch said. ‘Like that relative that will just never leave you alone, it will *never* leave me be.’

‘So is it like, do you look at me, and suddenly you want to – what was it – eviscerate me again?’

Pitch’s mouth tightened into a smile and he stared back up at the sky.

‘Thankfully it’s not often quite *that* dark.’

‘‘Often,’ he says,’ Jack said, and Pitch’s smile widened.

‘And yet it doesn’t worry you, does it? Why are you so calm about this?’

Jack placed his hand near Pitch’s shoulder and sent curls of frost over the fabric. One jumped across the fabric barrier to Pitch’s skin, and Pitch’s breathing hitched, his eyes found Jack’s again. There was something sensual in that gaze, and Jack shivered.

‘Uh, I guess I just am,’ Jack said, and then Pitch bent his arm, reached up and hovered the palm of his hand over the back of Jack’s where it rested in the snow. Even though he was making no contact, Jack felt a twinge of fear.

‘Calm about the fact that I have my dark thoughts, but less about this, yes?’ Pitch said, and Jack moved his hand out from underneath Pitch’s, even though they hadn’t touched at all. ‘And we were doing so well last night.’

Jack clenched his hands in the snow in frustration. He wasn’t worried about Pitch’s dark streak, and yet the promise of a simple, gentle touch left something oily moving through his chest. He avoided Pitch’s gaze and felt the snow turning dense under his grip, becoming ice. His brow furrowed and he clenched his teeth. He could do this, he *could*.

He leaned forwards, resolved. Pitch’s eyes widened.

‘Jack, wait-’

It was as far as he got before Jack pressed his trembling lips against Pitch’s, eyes squeezed shut and bracing himself with both hands by Pitch’s face. He felt warmth, he felt his nose against Pitch’s nose, Pitch’s closed mouth beneath his, he felt *fear*.

He lifted up and swore.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said quickly, ‘Jack, you’re-’

‘Shut up,’ Jack rasped. ‘I can do this.’

He pressed his lips back to Pitch’s mouth, who had started to shift away. Jack moved his arm so that it was harder for Pitch to move, and he exhaled out through his nose slowly, trying to concentrate. He focused on the small things, on the way the snow bunched under his palms, on the texture of Pitch’s lips against his, on Pitch’s two fast breaths, and then the way he forced his breathing to calm. The details helped keep the fear at bay, but he felt nothing of connection in what he was doing. He pushed himself backwards and gritted his teeth at himself. Pitch pushed himself upright immediately, staring at Jack.

‘What was *that*?’ Pitch said, disgust moving over his features. ‘You heard me *perfectly* well when I told you that I wanted you to come to me with want and lust. Not *this*.’

Pitch looked shaken. Jack's lips thinned, he scowled.

'Fear turns you on, remember?' Jack said and Pitch's head snapped up. He looked thoroughly unimpressed. He stood abruptly and started dusting snow off his robes. His expression had closed off entirely. Jack knew that expression, he knew it too well now. Jack was mortified, he flew upright, staff in hand. 'Wait.'

Pitch stared at him.

'You would ask me to wait? I just said the same thing to you; tell me what you did.'

Jack felt the blood drain out of his face. Fear cascaded through him.

'No, but-'

Pitch placed a hand over his forehead and then shook his head rapidly, as though clearing something out of his head. He took a deep breath, another, and then looked at Jack properly. Jack thought he looked sad, and it tugged at something inside of him.

'Perhaps we both need a break,' Pitch said, and Jack eyes widened.

A break. A break from their *thing*? That's what people said when they wanted to break up, wasn't it?

'Oh,' Jack said, feeling like he was going to be sick, and Pitch's eyes widened in turn and he stepped forwards immediately, holding out his hands, palm upwards.

'When you jump to conclusions, Jack, you take *leaps* Olympic long-jumpers would be proud of. I only meant that we've been stuck in this Workshop for too long. The ward at Kostroma still stands. I've been meaning to retrieve some journals for my use anyway, and the change of scenery might do us both good. If I have to look at another elf today, I believe I will become a taxidermist.'

Jack managed to sort through his immense wave of relief enough to realise what Pitch had said at the end.

'I freeze them sometimes,' Jack whispered, and Pitch's lips turned upwards, his eyes narrowed conspiratorially.

'I *know*.'

'I mean they thaw out just fine. And they're just as annoying afterwards. It's just- They're the *worst*. Why does he even keep them around?'

Pitch started chuckling.

'Public image, I expect,' he said, and Jack shook his head.

'Yeah but North *likes* them, too.'

'North thinks that Christmas cake is delicious. He can't be trusted,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head, amused.

Still, he couldn't help but watch Pitch warily, concerned. Pitch had asked him to wait, and Jack hadn't listened. And Kostroma; he wanted to go there badly, but what would it be like? He had a complex wash of memories associated with the place.

August had come to Kostroma.

Jack closed his eyes and sifted hurriedly through his thoughts, trying to find another memory, something to distract him.

He found an image of he and Pitch lying in the snow; the day he'd realised how much sadness Pitch contained, how deep his grief. That was the morning after Pitch had wrung sensation after sensation out of him and left him in awe of Pitch and his own body. It was the he'd realised that Pitch blamed himself so much for all that he had lost, for all that the Nightmare King had taken from him.

Jack looked up at Pitch and offered a small smile. He'd seen sides of Pitch that many others hadn't. Kostroma was a special, and August couldn't ruin that.

'So, Kostroma then?' Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

'You will have to let me touch you, so we can teleport,' he said, and Jack realised just how much things had changed, that these basic things were now such an issue. 'Do you think you can manage? We could leave now, if you like.'

Jack walked over, shivered. He reached out and paused, couldn't quite place his hand on Pitch's robe. Not yet.

'I wanted to go back while you were gone,' Jack said, staring at his hand, at the inch it needed to cross to Pitch's chest. 'But I wouldn't let myself. Because you weren't there. I just...'

Jack pressed his hand onto fabric and sighed in relief when he felt no fear. He stepped closer and pressed his other hand up and curled his fingers around Pitch's upper arm.

'I didn't want you to go back without me,' Jack said, laughing at the memory. 'When you wanted to go back to recuperate. It's your home, and I didn't want you going back without me.'

'Then this will work nicely. Are you ready?'

Pitch placed his hand over Jack's back, and Jack nodded, leaning his forehead forwards.

'Will you kiss me first?' Jack said, against the material of Pitch's robe.

Pitch didn't do anything for a moment. Jack wondered if he was crossing a line, wondered what Pitch would do if he was.

Jack blinked when a warm finger slid under his chin, he coaxed Jack's head upwards and looked into his eyes. Whatever he was looking for, he seemed to find, because he bent his shoulders and lowered his lips slowly, making gentle contact. Jack's eyes fluttered shut after a few seconds passed, but Pitch was already straightening again, a small smile on his face.

'Good?' Pitch said, and Jack tightened his fingers, wished for once that he didn't have the staff in his grip, hindering him from holding onto Pitch properly.

'Let's get out of here,' Jack said. Pitch tightened his arm around Jack's shoulders.

'Happy to oblige.'

The darkness swallowed them whole.

\*

They landed within the wards, outside of the house in Galich, Kostroma. It took Jack a few seconds to gather his senses. He disliked shadow teleportation even more now that he knew what the darkness felt when it was alive and trying to find its way inside of him. He knew it was a non-malicious darkness they travelled through; but all the same it jarred him.

It was a cloudy day in Kostroma, a gloominess hanging dark over the woods. The house was standing, as familiar as always except...

Something was wrong.

The door hung off its hinges, a black murk lurked beyond. Several of the windows had been smashed.

'Is the ward broken?' Jack said.

Pitch didn't reply, and Jack looked at him. He was staring at the house, mouth open.

'Pitch?'

'The ward is still whole,' Pitch said, 'I can feel the magic of it. This...'

Jack flew forwards slowly, holding his staff out. He heard Pitch following a few seconds later. He stared at the multi-storeyed house and felt a wave of dread move through him. It didn't look cosy, it looked like something out of a horror movie.

*Just the clouds, Jack thought. The windows can be fixed.*

He pressed the door aside with his staff, and it creaked ominously. Jack turned and looked at Pitch, wished Pitch had his sword, his axe, but...his staff would have to do.

*What happened here?*

Jack wondered if the Nightmare King had visited while Pitch had been possessed again. After all, reports were that the Nightmare King disappeared a lot. But why would he do this?

Jack scowled. He could guess. Ruin the one place that Pitch thought of as a kind of home.

Pitch shuddered out an exhale and Jack turned back to him, worried.

'It can be fixed,' Jack said. Pitch looked past him into the shadowy hall and beyond.

Jack followed his gaze and then felt his heart sink. Framed illustrations were on the floor, glass broken, illustrations torn. The walls had been ripped at and scratched. He flew inside hesitantly, keeping his staff in front of him. The Nightmare King was gone, defeated, but he was grateful for the metal of Pitch's sword on his staff all the same.

Shredded pieces of fabric were scattered around the place; remnants of rugs, clothing, tapestries. Jack looked into the kitchen. The table was broken, the chairs now splintered pieces of wood. Jack's eyes drifted to where a bloodstain had once been on the floor – Pitch's blood, all that time ago... his gaze moved up. Cabinet doors ripped off cabinets, ceramic shattered into shards, not a single whole glass or cup remaining. Even the cutlery had been bent. Everything had been destroyed.

'Pitch...' Jack said, looking up the staircase into the thick darkness above. Pitch's room was up there. The room where he kept his journals, where he'd kept the locket. The room where Pitch had



made Jack feel cherished and special. There was a lump in his throat, dread and a morass of anger, of horror.

He started to float up the stairs and flinched when he heard one of the steps creak behind him.

‘It’s just me,’ Pitch said absently.

Pitch looked shaken. His eyes kept roving around the house, from the walls, to the illustrations, to the torn pages and covers of books littering the floor.

‘You don’t remember this?’

‘They were so strong,’ Pitch breathed. ‘I don’t remember much at all. I was...kept in the dark.’

Jack winced when he realised that Pitch meant *literally*.

‘Could it have been anyone else?’ Jack said, and Pitch shook his head woodenly.

‘The ward is still whole, he wouldn’t have known how to break a Seelie ward and remake it again. It couldn’t have been anyone else. He came on his own.’

Jack floated slowly up the stairs, paused on the second landing, before continuing up to the third floor, where Pitch’s room was. He didn’t care about the rest of the house, he just wanted to see what had been done to that room. He hoped against hope that the Nightmare King had gotten bored, had left.

Jack could hear his own breathing by the time they reached the final floor. He slowed down, could feel Pitch behind him. It gave him strength.

‘Why are you going first?’ Pitch said suddenly, and Jack laughed breathlessly.

‘I’m the only one who brought a weapon.’

Pitch said nothing else after that.

The voice was stolen from Jack’s lungs when he saw the depth of destruction in Pitch’s bedroom. Entire chests were turned over; shelves, drawers and their contents flung across the room, splinters of glass and mirror dully picked up the light on almost every surface. The posters on the four poster bed had all been snapped like match-sticks, the duvet and sheets ripped and torn. Pages of journals were scattered everywhere, and there were holes in the wall, as though cannonballs or something else had ripped straight through them, letting more of the dim outside light in.

Jack paused when he saw a dull, rectangular metal container resting where others might keep a glory box or hope chest at the foot of their bed. It was about the same size, too. He couldn’t tell how it was sealed. It was the only thing whole in the room, and it hadn’t been there before. It was an ugly addition. Pitch stilled, stared at it wide-eyed.

‘Pitch?’

Pitch didn’t move. He didn’t even seem capable of speaking.

Jack drifted closer to the metal box, saw a tiny card resting on top of it. He startled when Pitch moved alongside him, silent and more out of it than Jack could remember seeing him. Jack read the scrawled, jagged script:

*Did you miss me?*

Jack reached down and picked the stiff card up, and the box gave a small *click!* The card had been resting on top of a small switch.

‘*Jack-*’ Pitch’s voice, something raw and frightened lurking inside of it.

Dark, deep laughter that didn’t belong to either one of them swam sinisterly through the room, drifted from the box itself. And then a small child’s voice – a girl’s voice – distressed and terrified:

‘*Daddy?*’

‘Oh god,’ Jack breathed, as Pitch made a tortured sound beside him. Pitch bent double, hands pressing over his ears, and Jack’s breath caught in his throat.

Nausea turned his stomach upside-down when he realised whose voice he was hearing.

Nightmare Men pushed their way out of the box and Jack stumbled backwards into Pitch, holding out his staff. The laughter continued, and one made the facsimile of a face; hollow eyes, hollow mouth, and whimpered:

‘*Daddy, I’m scared!*’

‘*NO!*’ Pitch roared beside him, and Jack realised they were outnumbered. Hopelessly. Because Pitch didn’t have a weapon, because the staff wasn’t enough to keep them back, and the laughter was growing into a cacophony of humming chaos; a smug, malicious, self-satisfied *drone* of evil. They crowded closer, tendrils of shadow writhing towards them.

‘Go! Go, go, go! We have to *GO! PITCH!*’

‘*Help me, Daddy!*’

Jack’s cry was lost in the sound of Pitch’s scream.

## Chapter End Notes

... \*ducks projectiles\*

\*

In our next chapter, 'Gone but not Forgotten,' the shit hits the proverbial fan.

# Gone But Not Forgotten

## Chapter Notes

A thousand thank yous. The response to that previous chapter was epic! You folk are all incredible, and I hope you enjoy this chapter. :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pitch's scream transformed into a roar of rage.

Jack couldn't afford to look at him, waving his staff at the Nightmare Men to keep them back, pushing Pitch backwards with the weight of his own body. Frost went everywhere, spinning out of his feet, his hands, his staff. His arms were iced, he couldn't help it. All he had was terror, and it fed the ice inside of him. But the ice didn't scare the living shadows. Not at all. The individual Nightmare Men – laughing and pressing forwards – only cared about avoiding the metal from Pitch's sword that coated his staff.

Jack shrieked when he felt a band of strength wrap around his torso, and then the breath was stolen from his lungs as they teleported through darkness. Jack wailed, certain it meant they were doomed, that the shadows were coming for them. The band around his waist tightened further until they tumbled out the other side in the middle of Pitch's room in a busy, light-filled Workshop.

Pitch landed hard on the floor. Jack was up in the air immediately, staff out, ready to fight back the shadows if he had to. They weren't going to get Pitch, they couldn't! He didn't go through everything he went through, just to see him taken again.

There were no shadows, except those that naturally occurred.

Behind the closed door, the sound of industrious yeti working on a bevy of toys came. The toys themselves shrieked, whistled, played tunes. It was a juxtaposition Jack wasn't prepared for.

'What the hell was that?' Jack gasped. 'What the *hell* was that?'

Pitch didn't respond, crouched over himself on the ground, hands up around his head, chest heaving. Every exhale was pained, every inhale sharp.

A shaft of pain spread through his own chest as he realised what had just happened. Kostroma had been *destroyed*. And in its place, the Nightmare King had left *that*. Jack dropped to his knees. He just wanted it to be *over*.

'How did he know?' Jack whispered.

Jack's eyes widened when he realised that Pitch had wanted to go back on his own. He would have encountered that on his *own*, with no one else to help him. He would have gone back to recuperate and the Nightmare King would have returned. The last thing Pitch would have heard – *again* – was his daughter pleading for help. It was a voice Jack wanted to scour out of his own ears, he couldn't imagine what it had been like for Pitch.

Jack turned to Pitch and crawled over, dropping his staff. He moved his arms around Pitch's shoulders, pressed his forehead into Pitch's back.

He wanted to say something, but no words came. How could he offer something in the face of what Pitch had just heard? Pitch trembled beneath him, and Jack made a sound when he realised Pitch's hands were digging hard into the sides of his head. It looked painful. He moved one of his hands to cover Pitch's, winced when he realised frost was spiralled freely out of his hands. He willed the ice to settle. He shakily smoothed frost particles away where they'd clung to Pitch's hand, exposed the olive-grey skin that was far colder than normal. Usually Pitch's warmth melted the ice, didn't waver in the face of Jack's cold.

Pitch stood up in a quick movement, and Jack scrambled to keep his balance. Pitch's face was blank, but Jack could see the distress in his eyes. And then Pitch stalked two steps forward to the chest of drawers by his bed and slammed both of his clenched fists down into it with a frustrated cry. The wood splintered underneath his strength, the chest of drawers fell apart. Pitch whirled and immediately walked towards the armchair, and Jack got up and realised that Pitch was going to destroy his room if he didn't do something.

'Wait, wait!' Jack flew in front of him. 'Wait!'

Pitch bared his teeth at Jack, he looked half-mad.

*Nope, he looks all mad.*

'Wait!' Jack shouted at him. 'Are they coming for us? Can they follow us here?'

Pitch stared at him like he didn't understand what he was saying, and then he blinked, dazed.

'I don't know.'

'You spent all your life fighting them, Pitch. Come on, you know this, you know what they can-'

'*I don't know!*' Pitch shouted at him. Jack flinched. 'I spent my *early* years fighting them, but they are *different* here. The Nain Rouge changed them with her influence. I didn't spend all my life fighting them, I spent all my life *possessed* by them. Let's be realistic here, Frost.'

Jack frowned at the use of his last name. Pitch stared out of the window, and then his fists started shaking, his fingers turning white at the knuckles.

'They've *never* done this before,' he said. 'To think ahead, as a collective. To *plan* for a future where I might be rescued.'

'Yeah, but they knew they could be defeated this time. Maybe...'

Pitch pressed his hands into his face and sank back down to his knees, the trembling rolling over him in waves. He made a thin, desolate sound and Jack knew what he was remembering. Pitch told him, months ago now, that they'd stolen her voice, made her plead with him. He remembered Pitch saying how it had driven him mad, even back then, to think what they might be doing to her.

'We know you can make the light again now,' Jack said, realising Pitch must have just been too shocked to make it. 'We can destroy them. We can get the weapons that North made together and destroy them.'

Pitch laughed into his hands.

'I can't make the light,' he said, and Jack frowned.

'I saw you. You *healed* me.'

‘Oh, I can do *that*,’ Pitch said, voice cracking. ‘I can heal you. I can’t make the light needed for destroying Nightmare Men. I can’t do that without your snowballs to jump-start the process, I think. And you cannot *make* them.’

Jack blinked at him, opened his mouth on a denial, and then realised it was true. The offensive light used against the shadows seemed to have a different quality to the golden light used to heal. He ignored the guilt that crept over him. He lowered himself to the floor, sitting before Pitch.

‘How did he know?’ Jack said, and Pitch moved one of his hands away from his face, took a deep, shuddering breath. Jack was dismayed when he saw tears on Pitch’s cheeks and came closer, reaching his hands out, taking Pitch’s between them. Like this, knowing it was about Pitch, knowing that it had nothing to do with himself, it was easier to handle touch.

‘He- They have access to my mind. Let’s not forget that *I* didn’t create Kostroma. They did. I simply...altered it, when I had enough strength to fight my way back up out of the dark.’

‘He knew Kostroma was yours, otherwise he wouldn’t have destroyed it.’

Pitch’s other hand fell away from his face, limp. His eyes widened, his pupils dilated. His face went slack. He looked like he’d just seen a ghost.

‘What?’ Jack whispered, dread coiling through him.

‘I have a vague memory,’ Pitch whispered, ‘of Pemberton.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I have- The Nightmare King visited one of my homes in Pemberton, during the most recent possession. I didn’t know why. I was only up long enough to think it strange before he became aware I was there and shoved me back down again. He had a metal box...’

Jack blinked at him, his mouth was dry.

‘Are you saying what I think you’re saying?’

‘Of course,’ Pitch said. ‘*Why* have a contingency plan to ensure repossession, without being particularly thorough? Kostroma couldn’t be the only location with a container of shadows.’

Jack remembered Pitch saying that he had more than one home, more than one place of residence. That the Nightmare King had lived in different places. From the lair underground, to Kostroma, to an airplane hangar, now this residence in Pemberton, wherever that was.

‘What else do you remember?’ Jack said, insistent, and Pitch shook his head, dazed.

‘I don’t. That’s all I remember from that time.’

‘No, you have to be able to remember more. Why don’t you-’

‘I *don’t*,’ Pitch said, making eye contact with Jack for the first time since they’d arrived back. ‘The shadows were stronger. Not as strong as when I was first taken, all that time ago, but stronger than they’d been when the Nain Rouge ripped them out of me. She created many more Nightmare Men, and they were stronger. And, Jack, they were less willing to drag me up to see what they were doing this time. They trusted me less. I remember the dark. I remember missing the light.’

He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself.

'I remember the dark,' he said, voice thin.

Jack stared at him. Always, Pitch was so contained, so put together, but now he looked shattered.

'We can destroy them,' Jack said. Pitch looked at him, looked like someone who didn't believe it would ever be over. 'Well, they *have* to be destroyed. They might be locked in boxes for now, but we just released a ton of them, and if they don't get you, they're going to get bored and find someone else. That's if they're even still in Kostroma.'

'I know,' Pitch said, and he shook his head. 'I know. I still can't believe- He used a lead-lined box. He meant for no one else to find them except me. After all, those homes can't be accessed by humans, and Kostroma was warded. Those shadows accepted a cage until they could be released. Nightmare Men *volunteered* to be trapped, to wait...forever, if necessary. It is unlike them. It is a level of delayed gratification I didn't know they were capable of.'

Jack remembered the Nain Rouge talking about the rise and the fall of power, her willingness to wait again until she could conquer once more. She'd seemed remarkably Zen about being brought low in her powers. Jack's eyes widened, was that part of what she'd given the Nightmare Men she created? An unshakeable faith in the rise and the fall?

'And he's really never done anything like this before?' Jack said, and Pitch carefully wiped at his tears with his fingertips.

'A long time ago. Not for *this* eventuality, but then that *was* before he knew he could be defeated. But there was a time when he planned far ahead, had multiple strategies. Time on Earth weakened the living shadows so that they subsisted only on children's nightmares, but there was a time when things were different.'

'When the Nightmare King could destroy worlds,' Jack said quietly, and Pitch nodded.

Pitch laughed softly.

'He knows my weaknesses now,' he said. 'He's known for a long time. But to hear her voice again...'

Jack reached out and placed his palm over one of the hands resting on Pitch's lap. He squeezed, looked up at him. Outside, a wheezy bell-like melody rung, one of North's toys whizzing by the door. The real world was bewildering; that the yeti and elves could be going about their Christmas business, while Pitch and Jack had just experienced *that*.

A wave of panic hit Jack, so strong that even Pitch made a sound. Jack flung himself forwards, wrapped his arms around Pitch and pressed his head into his chest.

'You won't survive being possessed again,' Jack said, voice higher than usual. 'You said. I could have lost you again. I-'

He gagged on the force of his fear. By the time weakened he only just became aware of the hands resting on his back. Warm and broad and steady.

'I'm here,' Pitch said, his own voice strained.

'I won't survive you being possessed again,' Jack said, and then closed his eyes at his words. He shook his head, ground his forehead into Pitch's chest.

'Jack...'

'I know how it sounds,' Jack said, and Pitch ran his hands down Jack's back. Jack felt them crest over the scars Augustus had given him, and he stiffened. Pitch paused.

'Too much?' Pitch said.

Jack laughed.

'Because after all of *that*, the thing we should worry about is how freaked out I get over these things. I mean, you broke your chest of drawers. With your hands.'

Pitch tightened his hands on Jack's back, then withdrew them and looked at them. They were grazed along their outer edges, but otherwise fine.

'We have to inform Gwyn. You know this means we have to use the horn. He may not be finished with that other distasteful business. I wonder if this counts as call waiting?'

'Hilarious,' Jack mumbled, and stared at Pitch uncertainly. His moods were all over the place, but then Jack supposed it made sense. Pitch was trying to claw back some stability for himself after what had just happened. Jack had a lot of experience in that. But as he looked at him, he couldn't help but think:

*You just heard your daughter's voice. You are so not okay.*

But Pitch didn't look okay. He looked exhausted, pained, ruined.

'If there are more boxes of Nightmare Men, they are hopefully going to stay imprisoned until we find them,' Pitch said, voice heavy. 'At least that gives us some time.'

Jack stood up, squeezed his eyes shut.

'Did you miss me?' God, I *hate* him. You act like you're so fine about everything, but he kept you in the dark, made you a prisoner in your own mind, took everything you had away from you, and I just...*hate* him. All the Nightmare Men, the living shadows, all of them. Do you think Augustus knew? Do you think this was his idea?'

'No,' Pitch said, and then lowered his head. 'No. I do remember that the Nightmare King had his own agenda. I've been thinking about what you said, about this being personal for Augustus. I think it is a good thing you haven't seen some of the things the Nightmare King is capable of, even if you are aware that he and I are *different*. I think it would be hard to look upon this face again if you knew.'

'I do know,' Jack said. 'Destroyed planets, people, killed entire races, I-'

Pitch's lips thinned, his face darkened.

'I would like to know how *you* know, when I do not know the full extent of what crimes the Nightmare King has committed. Please, tell me.'

'Right, so while you choose to deal with your stress by snarking it away, I'm going to get that stupid horn so we can tell Gwyn that the Nightmare King's apparently the worst even when defeated. Okay?'

Jack regretted what he'd said as soon as he said it, but Pitch didn't look hurt by his words. He looked lost, his gaze drifting through walls to some distant past. Jack picked up his staff and nudged him with the curve of it.

‘The horn,’ Jack said, and Pitch blinked back into awareness.

‘Hm?’ Pitch said and Jack frowned.

‘We have to contact Gwyn.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said absently, ‘I suppose you’re right.’

Pitch followed as Jack flew out of Pitch’s room, but his behaviour was disturbing. Jack knew shock when he saw it. He’d have to keep it together for the both of them.

\*

North got the horn for Jack. He didn’t leave, but watched Pitch with concern as Jack blew on the hollow animal horn, sending out that single, sonorous note that was far louder than a non-magical instrument could contain. He lowered it and placed a hand on Pitch’s forearm; Pitch didn’t react, stared blankly into the distance. Jack rubbed his arm gently and then gave the horn back to North, who set it on the plinth where it had been resting beside a recipe book devoted entirely to sticky date pudding.

‘What has happened?’ North said, and Jack frowned.

‘Stick around, we’ve got to tell Gwyn anyway.’

Gwyn arrived five minutes later, one side of his body covered in a thick spray of blood that had splattered all the way up into his hair. He looked less than impressed to be summoned by the horn, and the glare he directed in Jack’s direction made the breath stop in his lungs.

‘*What?*’ Gwyn snapped, then he took in Pitch’s expression, and something shifted on his face. His eyebrows drew together, he looked concerned. ‘What has happened?’

Jack looked to Pitch, and when it became obvious that Pitch wasn’t going to say anything at all. He looked at North and then back to Gwyn and swallowed nervously. He wasn’t the one who usually delivered the big news.

‘You know how the Nightmare King kind of disappeared sometimes and no one knew why?’

Gwyn dragged a hand through his hair and his jaw set.

‘Let me guess...’

‘We went back to Kostroma. He’d placed a rectangular box of the Nightmare Men in the middle of the house, and...Pitch thinks there might be more of those boxes. The Nightmare King had more than one place he lived, and so...well, yeah. Basically it’s a really sick version of an insurance policy, and it nearly worked.’

*Less well-said than what Pitch would manage, but that’s the main point, I think.*

‘You were nearly possessed again?’ North said to Pitch. Pitch looked at him, opened his mouth, and then closed it. Jack grimaced. This was not good. This was really not good.

‘Yeah,’ Jack answered for Pitch.

‘Why is he in shock?’ Gwyn asked bluntly, watching Pitch while attempting to rub a drying patch of blood on his cheek. He only succeeded in smearing it.



Jack looked at North nervously, and then decided there was nothing else for it. If Pitch wouldn't reply, then-

'They used the voice of my daughter against me,' Pitch said, focusing on Gwyn and frowning. 'Clichéd, but effective.'

'Pitch...' North said, an endless sympathy in his voice, and Jack's eyes widened when he realised that North knew who Pitch was talking about. One day, he would sit all the Guardians down and find out how much they knew about everything. He always seemed to be so slow on the uptake when it came to anything that mattered. How did North know? Pitch hadn't told him, Jack was certain of that. Had he found out some other way?

'We'll assemble the weapons, I can still make the light,' Gwyn said. His lips pulled into a tight smile. 'We had five more Unseelie arrive seeking refuge and a place to pass away safely, however. It may be difficult to-'

Pitch laughed under his breath, a small, repressed sound. He passed a hand over his eyes.

'I'd like to do this myself.'

'But you can't make the light,' Jack said, confused. Pitch looked at Gwyn as though he were asking a favour, and Gwyn looked too tired to disagree. Jack could smell the blood on him, thick and metallic, a coppery scent that clung.

'Will the Shadows hold for now?' Gwyn said, and Pitch started to nod, and then shook his head. It was clear he had no idea.

'The lead-lined boxes will keep them at least a bit longer. You may want to consider that they haven't approached me otherwise since the defeat of the Nightmare King. At any rate, it's becoming increasingly important that I learn how to make the light again, with or without Jack's help. And I daresay you are dealing with enough.'

'Believe me when I tell you that I'd rather deal with pre-emptively travelling to defeat Nightmare Men on their own, than your repossession.'

Gwyn narrowed his eyes at Jack, and then frowned.

'And you still cannot make your snowballs?'

'Yeah, tried, didn't work,' Jack said, and then shrugged. 'Tried more than once. Look, I just think the fun is gone.'

'It's not,' Gwyn said firmly, and Jack started to shake his head stubbornly, when North raised his hand.

'I also think it is not gone. But it is no matter, we can deal with that later. I am thinking I need some vodka. You were both nearly possessed by the dark. I, too, would like the Nightmare King to stay buried for once.'

Pitch raised his eyebrows in tired agreement, but he said nothing. It was the quietest Jack had ever seen him. Jack raised his hand again to Pitch's sleeve, touching it tentatively. He was surprised when Pitch looked at him, grateful. Pitch blinked a couple of times, then turned to Gwyn.

'Forty eight hours is all I ask. If I cannot make the light by then, I will let you know the coordinates to all of the residences, and you may take the weapons and your golden light. It is only

that I do not have a great deal to my name, and for now, I would prefer some of these places to remain private. They are enchanted, and humans cannot enter them. So until the boxes are opened by someone like you or I, they should remain closed. This was a personal attack.'

'It's become quite obvious that the living shadows are not much interested in possessing anyone except yourself or Jack. That much I can believe. Otherwise we'd have a bevy of Nightmare Kings around the place, and we don't. Thankfully.' Gwyn sighed and then nodded. 'Forty eight hours then. And tomorrow, Jack, I wish to return and see what you can do with your power directly. Perhaps we can address the fact of these snowballs, as well. Capricious power that it is.'

'It's not capricious. It's *gone*,' Jack maintained. He was certain that Gwyn was going to argue back, disagree, but Gwyn simply stared at him for several long moments, then lowered his hand to the bloodied hilt of his sword.

'Ah, didn't even have time to clean your weapon,' Pitch said, just noticing.

'No,' Gwyn muttered. 'I did not. However, you did the right thing, calling me. I'm...glad that you're both hale, after your encounter. Or as hale as can be expected.'

Gwyn and Pitch shared twinned, stiff smiles at that, and then Gwyn looked up as though he could see through the ceiling of the Workshop, to the sky beyond it.

'I am sure there is more to discuss on this matter, but as you are both safe, I am going to take my leave. You have the horn if you need me.' He turned to Pitch, a stiff sympathy making his features taut. 'You look like you could do with some-'

Gwyn froze as yeti ran towards them, pounding across the Workshop floor. They looked panicked, and one hurriedly exclaimed several sentences in their language to North, who turned immediately to Gwyn, eyes wide.

'August is being *here*, beyond the wards.'

Several things happened at once. Gwyn drew his bloodied sword and teleported away immediately, a dark look crossing his face. North shouted orders to the yeti, and a recently installed klaxon sounded a loud alarm through the building. Pitch turned to Jack, then pressed hands into his head as terror welled up in Jack and split through him like a bolt of lightning. He almost fell to his knees.

Jack backed up clumsily when North reached for him. Pitch said something quickly and North took a step back. Jack hopped up into the air, wanted to hide. But alongside that instinct came a flare of anger that crackled through him like ice breaking. What he'd wanted to do more than anything when he'd gotten out of that lake, was shoot his lightning-frost at August. They had the wards now. He could do it through the magic and stay safe, he was sure.

He could do it.

He tried to ignore what was going on in his head as best as he could. He flew up through the Workshop, away from Pitch and North, heedless of their cries.

Jack shot out through one of the open windows and then dropped down out of sight quickly when he saw that it wasn't just August beyond the ward, but a team of Unseelie fae as well. They were winged, possessed weapons. But all Jack could focus on was August, smartly dressed and nonchalant as always. Jack pressed himself to the Workshop walls, clung to the shadows and hoped he couldn't be seen. Gwyn had said that August couldn't compel him through a ward, but Jack didn't want to find out. If he was so susceptible, maybe August could.

Gwyn was down there, on the Workshop side of the ward barrier. His sword was out, he looked ready to fight, but Jack couldn't hear what he was saying.

Pitch approached August from the ground. He must have teleported through the shadows. Pitch looked around, and Jack realised that Pitch was searching him out. And then Pitch's gaze crawled up the building and found him unerringly. Jack thought that Pitch could see him where he was hiding in the shadows, and then realised that Pitch could sense his fears, and felt a wave of relief roll over him. He was still hidden.

North came out a minute later, sabres ready.

August stood close to the wards, talking quietly to Gwyn. But when he saw Pitch approaching, he paused, and the expression on his face changed from one of smug confidence, to one of- Jack couldn't pick it, it wasn't an expression he'd seen on August's face before. August tensed. He could tell that much.

Breathing through the worst of his fear, Jack flew over, tensing at the way August's smile returned when he caught sight of Jack. August raised a hand and waved languidly, his smile overly familiar. A thrill of cold snapped along the back of Jack's spine.

Jack pushed his staff forwards and the frost-lightning poured forth, turning the late afternoon light blue with its violence.

It shot forwards through the ward, but then hit hard against a dome of energy that only revealed itself when it was struck. It shimmered green where the ice hit it, shockwave ripples moving across it and revealing how large it was; large enough to protect August and the winged fae he'd brought with him. Jack grit his teeth, increased the intensity of ice he was making, but nothing pierced the dome.

Jack's hands had iced up again, turned bluish, and he let the icicles form and then swooped to get the right momentum, before flinging them out. They bounced off the green dome, and landed at Gwyn's feet.

The winged fae looked up, concerned. But August watched him with a calm, idle curiosity. He seemed unperturbed, confident in the strength of the dome. That expression infuriated Jack. It was the same expression he'd worn during...during...

Jack shrieked with rage. The entire length of his staff turned an incandescent blue, and the sky boomed around them. Ice swept forth on swirling, gale-force winds. Jack could feel the endlessness of the frost inside of him. If he couldn't penetrate the dome, he would *freeze* them all inside of it. He would bury them in ice.

*'JACK!'*

North's voice penetrated the mindless cold that was swirling through his mind. Jack looked down, and his eyes widened. He stopped making the ice immediately.

It had built up on the ground, where it had slid down August's dome. Gwyn was still facing August, sword out. But Pitch and North were staring, frightened, up at Jack, surrounded by broken pieces of ice.

Jack pointed the crook of his staff down towards the ground. He shook shards of ice off his hands and sweater. Shook them out of his hair. His heart was beating too fast, he thought he might be sick. He looked back at August, who wasn't even looking at him anymore, but facing Gwyn, one

hand on the hilt of his sheathed rapier.

The wind dropped beneath Jack's feet and he drifted down rapidly, several feet away from Pitch. He landed clumsily on shards and icicles, on crunchy, hard pieces of hail, some the size of baseballs. He lifted off the ground just enough that he could float to stand between North and Pitch. North looked Jack over to make sure he was okay, then stepped closer to Gwyn, holding his sabres up and ready. His chest heaved with anger.

Jack refused to press a hand to his aching chest. Refused himself the solace of wrapping an arm around his ribs. Tried not to think about how his scars hurt again. He focused instead on the winged fae behind August, focused on the fact that August hadn't attempted to move through the ward yet, which hopefully meant he still couldn't.

'Why are you always *here*?' August said to Gwyn, shaking his head, a faint smile on his face. 'Don't you have a Kingdom to run? Aren't you constantly going on about how you have a Kingdom to *save*? You look tired, Gwyn. I've seen you look this tired before. It's been a while, hasn't it?'

'Surrender yourself, August,' Gwyn said, voice cold. 'Or the next time we meet, you'll-'

August stepped forwards and placed a slender hand up against the barricade of his own dome. It shimmered green. He smirked.

'Big words from a loutish soldier who won't step through the ward to make a stand. It's only about twenty five of us against you, Gwyn. We all know you've slaughtered more than that on your own, on a battlefield.'

August raised his eyebrows at North's sabres.

'Dear me, it looks like Santa's *mad*.'

Pitch stalked forwards suddenly, his feet finding his way on the ice with an uncanny ease. He walked right up to the edge of the ward. August watched, the smirk disappearing from his face.

'You forget that I can read your fears, August. And quite well. They are *curious*.'

'Are they?' August said flatly.

'We know that you visited Makara, and we know *why*.'

August's eyes widened at that. But Pitch wasn't done talking.

'I wasn't able to read your fears quite so well, before the shadows found me again. When you visited us in Kostroma, when you came to the Workshop, you were using something, weren't you? A scarf was out of the question, but you found a magic to conceal it. Has it worn off now? Do you have so little left to barter for a renewal, now that your Kingdom is a mess?' Pitch said darkly. 'Jack's theory about you was right.'

'Jack's *theory*,' August said with some derision, green eyes flicking briefly to Jack, before moving back to Pitch again. He watched him warily. It was nothing like the complete disdain he seemed to hold for everyone else.

'Perhaps you and I should have a *private* conversation,' Pitch said, and August glared at him.

'You might use his voice, but you are *not* him,' he said smoothly. '*You* are nothing more than a

weak vessel, playing at being ominous. How you must *hurt* over what I did to your poor fuck-toy. Have you talked about it at length yet? Does he shy away from your touch? I didn't have long with him, but,' Augus directed a bored look at his pointed, clawed fingernails, 'I know what I'm doing. Shall we talk about what *you* fear?'

'Wait,' Gwyn said, staring at Pitch. 'Jack's theory is right?'

Pitch turned to Gwyn and nodded, and something dark crept over Gwyn's face. He turned back to Augus and then sheathed his sword.

'Is that so,' he said. 'Why are you here, Augus? Disenfranchising fae not enough for you anymore?'

'Oh no,' Augus asked, 'I asked first, didn't I? Why are you here so often? Are you fucking the sprite? Or-'

At that, North stepped up and swung his sabres hard against the dome. They bounced off it, but they struck with an audible sound, and the ripples moved out fast and wide; a deep, lake green. It stopped the conversation in its tracks, and Augus laughed lightly.

'Look at you, so protective. Over-compensating for every other thing you've not been able to help him with? Predictable.'

Jack narrowed his eyes. It occurred to him that Augus used some of Pitch's inflections when he spoke. Or...was he using the Nightmare King's instead? And Pitch said Jack's theory had been right. So it really was all personal? What was Pitch reading from him?

'I'm here so often, because of your obvious fixation on Pitch and Jack Frost,' Gwyn said bluntly. 'Because this is where you've centralised your messenger network. Because my people have let me know that you spend a great deal of time nearby. Because, Augus, we've been closing in on you and your chaos for some time, and I have the *time* spare to come here as often as I wish.'

Jack knew that for a lie, and from the smug expression that crept of Augus' face, he knew it too.

'Oh, Gwyn, you-'

'Are you still afraid of the dark?' Pitch said, and Augus' eyes snapped to his. His chest heaved once, and Jack narrowed his eyes, filing the reactions away for later. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that Augus was *scared*.

'Does it matter?' Augus said abruptly. 'This is *fascinating*, of course, but as the Nightmare King is no longer, I find myself not quite quaking in my boots just yet.'

Pitch opened his mouth to reply, but Jack floated forwards, heart hammering in his chest.

'You're lying,' Jack said. 'Even I know you're lying.'

'Then it *must* be true,' Augus drawled, and then laughed again. '*You* were fun. You remember what that was like, don't you? Fun?'

'Your words are poison, Augus,' Gwyn said. 'But all I see is someone who isn't sure what to do with his Kingship or the rest of his Court. Rail against it, but your end is coming. We are stronger than you, and my Kingdom less divided.'

'Perhaps,' Augus said, surprising Jack. 'Perhaps it is coming. But I've left every one of you with *so*

much to remember me by. Even *Santa*.'

August laughed and stepped back further into his own dome of energy.

'And my dear, sweet, Jack Frost,' August said, giving Jack his undivided attention. There was a curl of a smile on his face. 'So susceptible to the compulsions, but not as weak now, are you? You are powerful now. In a way. But answer me this. Do you still taste me at night?'

Several seconds passed. Jack's head was empty of all thought, as though he'd been struck hard in the head. Numbness washed over him, followed by the cool bloom of humiliation.

*North* was there, and *Gwyn*, and *Pitch*, and he hadn't wanted *any* of them to know. He hadn't wanted any of them to ever know. He'd tried to forget it himself, so many times. His throat closed, he couldn't move.

August stepped closer, watching him hungrily. And then his eyes drifted to Pitch, face pleased.

'Does it-'

A huge boom split the air. A sharp, thin whine that carved the atmosphere around them before the cannonball slammed into August's dome and sent a crack through it. The dome went from being clear, to showing its dimensions in a clear outline of translucent green. It was damaged. The cannonball had lodged firm.

Everyone looked towards the direction of the Workshop at once.

Toothiana, at the top of the Workshop, hovered above a cannon, and she waved at them cheerfully. They couldn't hear her, but Jack could see that she was stocking the cannonball again, getting ready to light the fuse. Sandy popped up on the other side, cheerfully holding another two cannonballs.

'So blunt force will destroy it?' Gwyn said, unsheathing his sword and stepping through the ward without a second thought.

He swung his sword back and then thrust it with full strength into the dome of energy. The sword sliced through, and Gwyn grunted as he forcibly ripped his sword up through the dome and created a tear in it. He walked through immediately, stalking towards August, sword out and ready, side stained with blood from earlier.

Waterweed coiled down August's arms and shot at Gwyn. Gwyn's sword came up and down again, severing the thick, rope-like weeds before they could wrap around his legs. August made a quick hand signal to the winged fae, and with a rush of wind they dispersed, wings slicing through the air as they spiralled upwards.

August stepped nimbly backwards, dropped to the ground and pressed his hand against the snow. A look of concentration passed over his face.

The earth began to shake, faintly at first, then loudly. Gwyn quickly ran backwards as the ground opened up at his feet and a pool of water appeared. The lake extended, growing quickly, and August smiled at them all.

'My cue to leave, I think. Until next time.'

With that, he stepped into the water and disappeared with barely a ripple. A minute later the ground shook again and closed up behind him, leaving a bare patch of soil clean of snow and ice. Gwyn

thrust his sword into the ground in frustration and then turned to Pitch.

‘You’re *sure*?’ Gwyn said, and Pitch nodded.

‘Positive. I think I will be getting my revenge against him after all. I daresay you *will* need me there, in the end. He is skilled at shifting his fears out of sight, but I know what I’m reading.’

Jack was watching them, dazed. He knew they’d all heard what August had said to him, because North was staring at him in that way that made him feel awkward and fragile.

*Do you still taste me at night?*

The conversation that Pitch and Gwyn were having disappeared and Jack groaned, bent double, as pain flared through him. Every time he slept, he *did* still taste August. It was an olfactory nightmare that wouldn’t disappear. The actual event hadn’t lasted long at all, yet Jack couldn’t scour the memory out of his mind.

He heard gasping, hyperventilating, something fell out of his hand and landed heavily onto the ground next to him. He heard the constant drip of water from August’s hair as it landed on a dry lake bed. Fingers tightened in his hair. His muscles tensed and bunched as though fighting a compulsion. His body was a trap.

He hadn’t wanted any of them to know. He was vaguely aware that he didn’t want them to see *this* either.

He heard the buzz of wings nearby, Pitch’s quiet voice, but neither of it was strong enough to pierce everything else. He stared blankly, saw the mess of ice he’d created, ice that wasn’t melting. But in his head the constant *drip, drip, drip* of water. His sides flamed with pain, blood trickled down his back. He felt the weight of August in his mouth and gagged on it, bending forwards and pressing his forehead into the ground.

A soft, persistent voice wore at him. He felt his mind strain towards it.

‘...Jack?’ Toothiana, her voice even and reassuring. ‘Jack, can you hear me? Jack? No, Pitch, leave it, he just needs a little longer. Jack?’

Jack shuddered and pushed his forehead harder into the ground.

He hadn’t wanted any of them to see him like this.

‘Jack? We need to get you back into the Workshop, okay? Can you look at me?’

Jack looked up slowly, worried that everyone would be standing over him. But when he looked up, Gwyn wasn’t even there, and North must have gone back inside. Pitch stood nearby, fingers pressed hard into his own temples. He was inhaling raggedly, his skin far paler than usual.

‘What’s wrong?’ Jack said, staring at him, voice hoarse, and Toothiana offered a small smile.

‘Jack, he reads fears, that’s what he does. That’s what he’s doing right now. You just have to give him a little while. Can you stand? Here, I’ll help you.’

‘I don’t want you to touch me,’ Jack said abruptly, and Toothiana smiled at him reassuringly.

‘Okay, Jack. I’ll just leave my hands out if you need something to hold onto, okay? But you don’t have to take them if you don’t want to. Your staff is by your side.’

Jack reached out for it blindly and stuck it into the ground, using its sturdiness as a way of pulling himself upright. His entire body felt weak. He wondered if he was going to be sick. He hoped not. He took several deep breaths, and Toothiana told him that he was doing the right thing. She turned to Pitch.

‘How are you doing over there?’ she called, and Pitch lowered a shaking hand.

‘I assure you, I have read the nightmares and flashbacks of *many* in the past.’

‘That’s not reassuring,’ Toothiana said with a smile. ‘And it’s not the same as reading *Jack’s*. We need to get you both inside, I think.’

‘You shot a cannonball at Au- at- You shot a cannonball,’ Jack said, and Toothiana laughed.

‘Someone had to do *something*. Thankfully I know my way around heavy artillery. Come on, you two.’

Jack took a step forwards and then stopped, shook his head.

‘North *knows*,’ Jack whispered, and Toothiana tilted her head at him.

‘What does North know?’

Jack felt something chilled move down his spine and lock him into place. He couldn’t go into the Workshop again.

‘Leave it,’ Pitch said, voice rough. ‘Leave that alone, Tooth.’

‘Alright, well, Jack, whatever he knows, he’s going to love you anyway. You know that, right? Jack, look at me.’

Jack looked up slowly, meeting her amethyst eyes, wondering where Baby Tooth had gone. Toothiana smiled at him again, and he frowned at her.

‘Where did Gwyn go?’

‘He had to leave. He said he would be back tomorrow. He looks like he could do with a long, hot shower, that one. Some time passed while you were on the ground. You probably don’t remember, but that’s okay, because nothing interesting happened, except for Pitch throwing a melodramatic fit.’

‘I did *not*,’ Pitch muttered, and Toothiana hummed a disagreement.

‘Well, he was worried about you, so I suppose we can forgive him that.’

Jack’s heart pounded a relentless beat in his chest. Pitch walked forwards until he was standing alongside Toothiana.

‘Can we just teleport?’ Jack said weakly. ‘I don’t want to- I don’t want to go through the main Workshop. I’d rather have, I’d rather try teleporting than...’

Jack trailed off, tense at the idea of anyone touching him, but knowing that it had to happen if they were going to teleport. Still, he’d rather that, than seeing that expression on North’s face any time soon. He needed a break.

‘We can teleport,’ Pitch said, and then turned to Toothiana. ‘I can take it from here.’



‘Can you?’ Toothiana said sceptically. ‘You need someone too, Pitch. I can see you grinding your teeth from here, you’re going to wear them down to stubs if you don’t start looking after yourself as well.’

‘Defeating Augus will help a great deal with *that*.’

‘That’d make everyone’s day, absolutely,’ Toothiana agreed, and then shrugged. ‘But in the meantime, I think you need some other people to talk to. You’re out of practice. Or maybe I should say you’re as bad as Jack? And you know, I’m here now, you might as well make the most of me. You should come find me later.’

Pitch’s eyes widened into a stare, but Toothiana didn’t say anything else to him. She turned back to Jack and beamed at him.

‘I’ll see you later, okay, Jack?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. She nodded and then flew up and away, back to Sandy’s tower. Jack felt the lack of her colourful presence acutely, but he was glad it was just he and Pitch. He couldn’t make eye contact as Pitch walked over.

‘We need to move over to the shadows,’ Pitch said. ‘I can’t teleport from here.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack muttered. ‘I can do that.’

He walked woodenly over to the underside of the building, and Pitch walked alongside him, quiet. His hands dig into his temples, briefly.

‘I’m just not good for you at the moment,’ Jack said, and Pitch laughed under his breath; a raw, broken sound.

‘You’re not medicine, Jack. You don’t have to be good for me all the time. And the rest of the time you are exactly what I need.’

‘This has been a shit day,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded fervently.

Jack shivered as the shadow of the Workshop covered them. Pitch hesitated.

‘I don’t know how best to do this,’ Pitch admitted frankly. ‘Not after what just happened.’

‘I’ll come to you,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘That’s the way this seems to be working right now.’

He walked over to Pitch, paused when he was a foot away. He didn’t look up into Pitch’s face, wished that he could press his cheek into Pitch’s robe. He wanted Pitch to remind him that everything was going to be okay, but how could it be okay if Pitch *knew*? How would he be able to look at him the same way? Everything would be different now. Pitch would look at him and see *that*. How-

‘Jack, I knew,’ Pitch said heavily. ‘I knew. I had a flash of it the other day when we kissed.’

Jack looked up, met his eyes. Pitch nodded a confirmation.

‘As for the others- Gwyn doesn’t care. He cares for your welfare, inherently, but if he sees you functioning, he doesn’t care. He’s seen you functioning more often than not since the attack happened, so he has faith that you will be fine. North might need a day or two, Jack, but he’ll take it in stride eventually.’

'He won't,' Jack said, thinking of North talking about all that he'd lost. Was this another thing that he'd add to the list?

'Perhaps. But if that's the case, it won't be because he thinks that you did the wrong thing, or are somehow unclean because of it. North is a fighter, and I've seen him put his personal issues aside time and again to make sure he can be there for you. So after a couple of days, I think you'll find that North will be alright.'

'And you?' Jack said. 'You're not alright.'

'No,' Pitch laughed weakly. 'I heard my daughter's voice pleading for me to save her, today. I was nearly possessed again by the dark. The Nightmare King turns out to be gone, but refuses to be forgotten. Augustus taunted all of us. I realised that the Nightmare King, the *thing* that I brought to this planet, has done *unspeakable* evil to more than just- I don't remember a great deal of what happened there, but Augustus does. It comes through in his fears.'

'The *worst* day,' Jack mumbled.

He closed the space between them, forced his arms up and clung to Pitch's robe.

'Your room?' Jack said, and Pitch tentatively placed his hand on Jack's back. Jack hissed at the contact, squeezed his eyes shut. And they'd been doing so well, too. The touch felt like sandpaper.

But Jack didn't move away, and Pitch increased the pressure until he could transport them both through the darkness.

\*

Jack leaned his staff against the wall as soon as they were in Pitch's room. He wrapped an arm around his torso, glad that the door was closed, glad that the room was naturally dim. The Workshop was quietening down, the day was beginning to end.

'You are even more powerful than you were the last time I saw you,' Pitch said. He sat down on his bed, near the pillows, and stared at the broken mess that was his chest of drawers. He reached down and searched through the splinters of wood until he found a container of painkillers. He dropped two of them into his palm and dry-swallowed them, then dropped the container back into the mess of wood.

Jack stared at Pitch, mind racing. He remembered when he'd lost Mora, and his fear had crashed out of his body and into Pitch's and reminded him of losing his daughter. He remembered Sandy bringing Jack back to the Workshop. He remembered exhaustion and pushing Pitch back down onto the bed and learning his body more intimately than he had before. He'd enjoyed that. It hadn't been anything like the time with Augustus. He'd enjoyed that so much.

Jack stepped forwards, hands clenching at his sides. Every experience he'd ever had with Pitch, every physical memory they'd created together, they were all *good*.

Jack placed his hands on Pitch's shoulders, stood between his legs. Pitch looked up, frowned.

'Jack, *what* did I say to you about this sort of thing?'

'But I can do this,' Jack said. 'There's no reason why I shouldn't be able to do this.'

'You *can* do this,' Pitch said. 'But I'm not sure you can do it now.'

'I *can*,' Jack insisted, and then lowered his mouth to Pitch's.

Pitch's hand came out and pushed Jack backwards. He stood and put distance between himself and Jack.

'I can't, Jack. It feels like forcing you. Because you're forcing *yourself*. Your fears are too strong. I can't tell what I'm feeling, because all I see is what you are doing to yourself. Which is force, and loathing, and the sureness that if you don't perform, or do something *right*, I'm going to disappear. I can't tell you that I'm not going anywhere, I would like dearly to carve those words from my very vocabulary, but I'm *not* going to disappear over something like this. I can't be a party to you doing this to yourself.'

Jack folded his arms around himself, and Pitch ran hands through his own hair, before straightening his robes.

'If you want to try something this evening, I suggest sitting down with me in the armchair. It's been a long day. I could do with your company.'

'Yeah?' Jack said, and then smiled weakly. 'Even after all that?'

'*Especially*,' Pitch said, wry.

Pitch sat in the armchair and beckoned Jack over. Jack hesitated, then sighed. If they could get through the next two hours without any other chaotic nonsense happening, he'd be grateful.

He floated onto the armrest. He stayed still for a while, then looked at Pitch's torso longingly. He tried to meet Pitch's eyes, but they were closed, mouth set into a frown. Jack reached out and placed his hand on Pitch's robe, over the ridge of his collarbone.

'Can I come closer?' Jack said. Pitch nodded without opening his eyes. 'What's the fear like for you, at the moment?'

'Tolerable. You surprise me,' Pitch said. 'But I doubt you're well-adjusted, so much as in shock.'

'You started it with the shock thing,' Jack teased gently, and then clumsily crawled into Pitch's lap, legs bent beneath him. He turned so that he could lean against Pitch's shoulder, pressed his face into the robe itself. He breathed deeply, became aware that he was trembling. How long had he been shaking for?

'Turn the world off. I'm done,' Jack said, and Pitch laughed under his breath.

'But however will we manage without our daily dose of catastrophe and trauma?'

'Today was excessive,' Jack said, daring to fold his hands around Pitch's ribs, underneath his arms. It was warm, and his hands heated up. He became aware of dampness along his forearms, and realised his skin was still mildly iced from when he'd let his frost loose at August. Jack shuddered and pressed his face closer.

'There it is,' Pitch breathed, acknowledging the fear. He placed a hesitant palm flat on Jack's shoulder. 'Easy, Jack. It's okay.'

'I should be saying that to you,' Jack said. 'I saw how you were earlier.'

Pitch tensed.

‘Jack...’ he said, warningly.

‘Nope,’ Jack said. ‘You’ve had reminders of Seraphina come into your life three times in a really short amount of time. If there are more boxes of those stupid shadows, it’s going to happen again.’

Pitch increased the pressure of his palm on Jack’s shoulder. Jack let his body go limp, pressed himself lengthwise along Pitch and realised he had no energy for fear. Not now, not with Pitch like this against him.

‘I miss her,’ Pitch said, his voice breathless, catching on his pain. ‘I hear her again, I can’t *think*.’

Jack tightened his arms around Pitch’s torso and closed his eyes. In response, Pitch brought his other arm up around Jack and left it loosely around his ribs.

‘All it takes is for you to be pushed to the point of exhaustion, and we do just fine,’ Pitch said, and then he laughed. ‘How wonderful that it seems to happen so often.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, digging his fingers in and feeling his breathing slow down.

‘I’m going to rue the day I say this out loud, but I think I *will* start talking to Toothiana. Would you mind?’

‘Mind?’ Jack said, incredulously. ‘No, why would I mind? I just- You never do things like that, do you?’

‘What’s the point in expecting you to reach out to others, if I will not do the same? And I respect her. As inane as her prattling can be at times, in the sense that she does like to wax lyrical about *teeth*, she is made of tempered steel, that one.’

Jack leaned up and pushed his face into Pitch’s neck, a furnace of heat against his face.

‘How are you gonna learn to make the light again in forty eight hours?’ Jack said, and Pitch’s hand drifted up towards Jack’s hair, then stopped abruptly. Pitch held his breath for a few seconds, and Jack realised that his own fear had welled before Pitch had even touched it. Jack wished, more than anything, that Pitch could put his hands in Jack’s hair. That it could be like it was.

‘I am going to have to get accustomed to that axe. And we are going to look for a way to rekindle your sense of fun, Jack. It’s there. It’s been there increasingly whether you’ve seen it or not. I think you don’t *want* it to be there.’

Jack shivered at the words and Pitch’s arms tightened around him.

‘It’s not the terrible thing you think it is, Jack.’

‘Easy for you to say.’

‘I suppose it is,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘But we will try, and we will see what happens. If all goes well, I’d like to repair Kostroma. My people have an innate ability to preserve, and that extends to repair. I think once that room is set to rights again, and the blasted Nightmare Men are gone, I will only see the good memories again.’

‘Will you?’ Jack said, and Pitch’s whole body shifted so that he could hold Jack tightly.

‘I’m willing to find out.’

‘Me too,’ Jack said, fatigue washing over him, drowning out anything that hurt. ‘Me too.’

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Hunting Down Fun,' finally, Jack gets to the bottom of what has been going on with his sense of fun.

# Hunting Down Fun

## Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all of your bookmarks, subscriptions, kudos and comments, you have no idea. :D They mean so much to me.

For those not following me at [Tumblr](#), you might not be aware that I've posted the first of [the Augus/Ash interludes](#) (moments of brotherly affection between Augus and Ash, pre-everything that's happening in these novels).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack managed two quiet hours enclosed in Pitch's arms, before the real world crowded into his mind. Pitch watched him leave with quiet acceptance, no judgement in his gaze.

Jack went back to his own room where Mora waited. It surprised him to see her there, since Mora had developed a friendship with Sandy and often spent nights up there with him. Jack smiled to see her and wrapped his arms around her neck. The fear she inspired wasn't so bad anymore. Perhaps Sandy had tempered it. Or perhaps Jack had just gotten used to a different intensity of fear.

He walked to his bed and lay down, wishing it was a tree bough, that he was in a forest. Sleep and nightmares waited for him. He didn't want the nightmares, but he wanted the blackness of sleep. He really didn't need to sleep very much at all, but it was a welcome respite from having to think. He was aware, as he withdrew his thoughts inwards and looked for the darkness that represented sleep, that looking to escape his mind like this wasn't healthy.

He didn't care.

His last waking moment before he threw himself into sleep, was of Mora coming up and nudging him, worried, with her nose.

\*

Jack woke with a start, a hand pushing at his shoulder. Gwyn stood over him, a faint look of disapproval on his features. Mora stood nearby, whickering softly.

'Huh?' Jack said, and Gwyn stepped backwards to give Jack some space. Jack swung out of his bed and looked around. It was a blazing, blue day outside. The sun was already heading towards the opposite horizon.

'It's mid-afternoon.'

Gwyn was wearing far more clothing than usual. Pants, as well as thick, fur-lined, knee-high boots. A jacket lined with a fur that Jack didn't recognise, that possibly came from an animal that didn't exist in the human world, along with pale leather gloves. It was very similar to what he had worn when they'd climbed the mountain. Jack grabbed his staff where it had been leaning against the wall and looked at Gwyn apologetically.

'I didn't think I'd sleep for so long,' he said. Gwyn didn't look much better than he had the day before. His energy was far more abrasive than normal. Jack reached a hand out to Mora and rubbed

the bridge of her nose, the warmth of it waking him up.

‘I’ve already spoken with Pitch,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’d like to borrow you for a little while, so I may see your powers in action. I’d like to know what you do with them when you haven’t been aggravated by another fae. Are you amenable?’

‘You’ve already seen it, but yeah,’ Jack said, nonplussed, then flinched when Gwyn walked towards him. He knew it was so they could teleport, knew that Gwyn didn’t mean anything by it, but Jack couldn’t help it. Gwyn didn’t even pause, though he noted the gesture with a quick widening of his eyes. Gwyn folded a large hand around Jack’s shoulder and teleported them both out of the Workshop.

They landed in a deserted field, lightly dusted with snow. Jack had no idea where they were. He couldn’t see any signs of fae or human habitation, not a fence-line or a hedgerow.

‘Where are we?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Gwyn said, then looked around and offered a better answer. ‘This is old fae land. When you are chosen as King, you also receive the lands that have been gifted to the Kings and Queens over time; at least, those that have not been taken as personal land. It’s protected land, so we shouldn’t be bothered here.’

Gwyn looked Jack over critically. ‘You seem to be holding up, after yesterday.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, ‘I’m still waking up. Give it time, though. I’m sure I’ll manage to freak out about something.’

Gwyn’s lips curved up in the smallest hint of a smile, then he gestured to Jack’s staff.

‘You’re going to do some real damage with that frost, if you don’t learn how to get it under control. Whatever the golden light did to you, it doesn’t look like it’s reversible, and I don’t think – by any means – that you’re getting weaker. A power like that could destabilise the weather, do global harm. I’d like to see it in its raw form first, look at its limits. Perhaps we can find a way to bring it under your control.’

‘So...’ Jack said, and Gwyn pointed in a direction that faced away from them both.

‘Start over there. I’ll remove myself from the worst of it. Do you know how to stop once you’ve started?’

Jack frowned. Did he? Pitch had stopped him once, Mora another time, North- The closest he’d come to stopping himself was when he let loose in the Arctic Circle.

‘Maybe not,’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded.

‘Then it’s a good thing I’m here. You can start whenever you’re ready.’

Jack flew some distance away, wanting clearance. He faced away from Gwyn and held his staff out. He closed his eyes, sank into his core of frost, strengthened his double-handed grip on his staff. To think, once upon a time, the staff had been broken by Pitch. Now it was practically indestructible, coated with the metal from Pitch’s own sword.

His staff flashed a pale, ephemeral blue, and frost lightning crackled all around him. He focused on a point on the horizon, felt the air temperature drop around him until even he felt uncomfortable and suddenly understood why Gwyn was rugged up for cold weather. Gales howled around him,

whipped his hair, sloughed off the ice that was forming on his arms and the back of his neck.

Jack altered his stance so it was more grounded. He let go of his ice.

The world around him turned to winter. Clouds rolled together, gigantic in the sky, snow formed at his feet, springing into existence only to be immediately squashed by pieces of ice falling overhead. Frost lightning leapt to giant heights. Bolts of it chased each other up into the atmosphere, and when they'd finished emitting their incandescent light, frost particles fell to the ground. Snow began to fall. In minutes, the world became grey, white and pale blue. A space of cold and frost and winter.

Jack didn't feel like he was draining himself. He went deeper into himself, tried to find the core of his power, exhilarated. The cold temperatures didn't bother him, his body was numb. He couldn't feel the ice growing from his arms and fingers, wasn't destabilised by the wind whirling around him. He planted his staff into the ice that was piling around him and the air crackled and then boomed. He felt the shockwave of it, had no idea what caused it, only knew he wasn't done.

There was more, so much *more*. Jack's eyes flew open in excitement. He didn't even know what more there could be, but he wanted to find out. He-

The weight that slammed into him cut his thoughts in half and he disconnected from his frost immediately, spun around to defend himself. Gwyn, hair messed from the gale-force winds stood ready to disarm Jack if he needed to.

Jack looked around and winced. The field looked more like an ice-field from one of the Poles, except that Jack could see a line of trees in the distance.

'That took ten minutes, approximately,' Gwyn said, and rubbed a hand over his face. 'We have a problem.'

'Yay?' Jack said, and Gwyn shook his head.

'No. Let's return to the Workshop.'

Teleporting back was quick and painless. At least Gwyn's preferred method of transport was easier, and far more comfortable than travelling through Pitch's shadows. For all that Gwyn could be abrasive, dissolving into light was one of the more pleasant ways of going from place to place.

They landed outside of the Workshop, close to the protective boundary of the ward. Gwyn let go of Jack immediately and gave him space. He walked away, then turned back, placing his hands on his hips and looking down at the ground. After about a minute of thought, he looked speculatively at Jack.

'It's not worth trying to find the limits of that power,' Gwyn said finally. 'It's too dangerous.'

Jack stared as Gwyn sat, folding his legs beneath him. He sighed.

'There are some of us, some of the fae, who – through birth, chance or fate – end up with powers that are simply too strong for this world. The Nain Rouge is one. I...am another.'

Jack's eyes widened. He pointed the crook of his staff down towards the ground and floated over to sit next to him.

'What?' Jack said, and Gwyn looked out into the distance.



‘There are powers which, if let loose without boundary or limitation, would devour the world. Look at the Nain Rouge. Imagine what she would have become without the Nightmare King to stop her. There are several fae, probably more than is entirely comfortable, that are too powerful. Who either developed powers because they *want* to destroy the worlds we live in, or – through some accident – simply ended up that way.’

Gwyn cleared his throat, pursed his lips.

‘You have to be careful, Jack. That may not something that can be tamed through training. I think increasing self-mastery benefits everyone, and I think you should certainly keep working on your self-control, because it’s not safe for you to simply unleash your frost whenever something angers you, or frightens you, or shocks you. But the frost itself?’ Gwyn shook his head.

‘What do you mean you’re one of them?’ Jack said, and Gwyn smiled stiffly.

‘The light I make. I will never be able to unleash it fully. It is simply too dangerous.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, thinking about it. ‘It never felt like a very nice light.’

Gwyn’s eyes narrowed.

‘Truly?’ he said.

‘Yeah. It feels...prickly? I mean, on the surface it’s pretty. But underneath that it’s like – I don’t know, weird. Does it run in the family?’

Gwyn laughed, there was no humour in the sound.

‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘It’s an anomaly. It’s not even typical for light fae.’

Jack had never seen much of Gwyn’s light. A few flashes against the shadows before it turned out that the light was ineffective against them. And later, Gwyn had made it in order to break through August’ dome. It was then that Jack had realised how strong it was. It was *light*, and yet it had penetrated through all that water, shaken the ground, caused the dome itself to split open. It had aborted August’ attack on Jack and had saved him from worse things. Jack wondered how destructive it was in its raw form, and what it was like for Gwyn, constantly having to hold it back.

Gwyn’s bitter laughter about the light not running in the family made him think of the last meeting with Ash, when he’d insulted Gwyn by saying that he took after his father. It had been intended as cutting, hurtful, and Jack didn’t know why.

‘Gwyn?’ Jack said. ‘What is your family like? Are they still...around?’

Gwyn’s expression changed immediately. He looked suspicious, and his gaze even flickered past Jack’s shoulder, as though checking no one else was around. After he seemed satisfied that they were alone, he looked down at the ground and dragged leather covered fingers through the snow.

‘My father was killed. My mother is still alive. You probably heard speak of her during your time in the Seelie Court. Her name is Crielle.’

Jack’s eyes widened. The name was familiar. Crielle was a Court fae; Jack had seen her a handful of times, perfectly coiffed, every sentence well chosen. Everyone talked about how favourable it was to be invited to one of her parties or soirees. Yet during some of the private conversations he’d eavesdropped upon, they’d talked of Crielle’s cruelty. Of her dislike of Gwyn. Jack hadn’t realised she was his *mother*.

Jack blinked in shock.

‘Wait, but she doesn’t like you,’ Jack said.

Gwyn’s smile was more of a wince.

‘That’s putting it kindly.’

‘But you’re the King? Don’t get me wrong, but it doesn’t really seem like there’s much more a fae can do in the fae world that counts as really major accomplishment. Aside from like, all those battles that you keep winning. And the fact that the Nightmare King has been defeated. You know, aside from all of that.’

Gwyn took a deep breath, sighed it out.

‘My family have been Court fae for generation after generation. Tens of thousands of years, they’ve always been held in high esteem in the Seelie Court. They throw only Seelie fae, and have been much valued in political matters. During times of crisis, my grandfather, my father, and others have been called upon to prove their merit. And they’ve done so. Status is important to them, but I was not their ideal candidate for the throne.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Jack said, confused, and Gwyn shrugged.

‘You don’t need to.’

‘You seem alright to me,’ Jack said, and Gwyn looked at him in surprise.

‘Indeed? I’m not the charming son they’d hoped for, and it wasn’t on their vote that I was given the Kingship. I do not possess the wit or the mien they’d hoped for in a child, and I am more a blunt object, than anything else. I was relegated out to learning the skills necessary for battle, and they began grooming my cousin for the Court. But I liked the skills necessary for battle, and I became proficient; unfortunately that meant that during a time of crisis...’

‘The Court fae voted for you instead,’ Jack said, and frowned. How would Gwyn know he wasn’t the charming son his parents had hoped for, unless they’d told him? And why would someone relegate their son out to battle, knowing that he could die? What sort of life had that been like, with his cousin being groomed as a Courtier, while he was the ‘blunt instrument?’

‘So I’m guessing they’re kind of the reason that you’re crap at talking to people,’ Jack said, and Gwyn’s eyes widened in astonishment.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘No, it’s just that...I don’t know. I mean it’s obvious they don’t support you.’

‘I don’t need their support,’ Gwyn said, and Jack frowned at him.

‘I heard the way Crielle talks about you when you’re not there. She doesn’t just disagree with you being on the throne, she-’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said abruptly.

Jack had been close to saying, *She hates you*. But there was something in the expression on Gwyn’s face that warned him not to go there. And, even though Gwyn was manipulative as hell, that didn’t seem to be a valid enough reason for his family to dislike him. Firstly, Gwyn didn’t

always seem to be like that. And secondly, that's exactly what his mother was like. It was obvious to see where he got it from. And if Ash's comment was anything to go by, his father had been the same.

'Ash said you took after your father, at the meeting,' Jack said. 'What was that about?'

Gwyn stared at Jack, as though he could decipher why Jack was asking these questions at all. And it was that expression – a cross between bewildered and hostile – that told Jack all he needed to know. He'd seen kids run away from home with that look on their face, before striking back towards their front door, realising that it was winter and they wouldn't get far.

'My father's centre was ruthlessness. I imagine Ash was referring to that.'

Jack stared at him.

'Was it...always that?'

'Ruthlessness?' Gwyn made a face. 'I can't imagine it ever being anything else.'

'Yeah, he must've been a *great* father. I can see it now,' Jack said, laughing to himself. 'Man, you're just as screwed up as the rest of us, aren't you?'

Gwyn glowered, and Jack rolled his eyes. Gwyn did scary things, he could be scary, but Jack didn't find him frightening. Not since climbing the mountain with him, not since seeing him after his nightmare, and not since realising that Gwyn – in his own way – treated Jack with a peculiar kind of respect. For all that he hated being King, he worked hard to make sure he did a good job of it. Even if his methods were sometimes awful. That didn't seem to be so unusual amongst the fae, anyway.

Jack tried to think about the things that Gwyn enjoyed doing. There didn't seem to be too many of them.

'Hey,' Jack said, 'If you ever did want to spar...'

Gwyn looked shocked, and it was Jack's turn to feel surprised at the almost shy smile that crept over Gwyn's face. But as soon as Jack saw it, it was gone again.

'With that frost of yours, I'm not sure,' Gwyn said, and then he offered a flash of a grin which was all teeth. 'Perhaps.'

Jack looked back towards the Workshop and wondered how Pitch was doing. They had forty eight hours for Pitch to learn how to make the light. It wasn't long enough. He wondered when August would come back, when Gwyn's plan would go into effect. Gwyn had seemed far more purposeful now he knew that Pitch could read August's fears properly. He looked at Gwyn sidelong, and was surprised to see Gwyn looking at the Workshop as well.

'Gwyn, what was August like? Before he was all...evil? People talk about him the way- The way I think about Pitch and the Nightmare King.'

Gwyn looked down at the snow and his shoulders heaved on a sigh.

'You must keep in mind that Pitch was possessed by living shadows. They *are* different beings. Are you...are you sure you want to talk about this?'

Jack wasn't sure, but he couldn't forget how Ash had talked about his brother. He shrugged,

indicated with his hand that Gwyn should go on.

‘August is Unseelie, so I never had a great deal to do with him. Especially as he was private and quiet, only attending parties and such when invited. And I was often in the field, on campaigns or tours in battle. It was two different circles. But I knew of his reputation as someone who could... heal others through unconventional means. And I- You’ll recall that my centre was once triumph? I told you of how I...’

‘You said you forced someone to do something,’ Jack said. ‘Which was pretty evasive.’

Gwyn stilled and then pursed his lips.

‘This may change your opinion of me and if it does, then so be it. The story is known by so many, it’s hardly told now. I had been in the middle of a campaign against an old, bitter family enemy. They had a sacred sword much coveted by my kin, and I stole it. Mistakenly, perhaps, but I did. They raised a giant host against my soldiers and I, and we confronted them in battle. I was concerned only for triumph. But also I was- There is talk of a family curse that leads us down pathways of madness and darkness. And I was possessed by it, that day.

‘We were triumphant, of course, but my triumph was not enough. A nobleman that we took as a Prisoner of War – Nwython – slighted me. And his son, a soldier, was also present. I took them aside and I slew Nwython in front of his son. And then...’

Jack stared at him. Gwyn smiled bitterly.

‘Then I forced Cyledr – his son – to eat his father’s heart. It understandably drove Cyledr quite mad.’

‘Oh god,’ Jack said.

‘I was destroyed by my own actions. I would never have considered approaching an Unseelie fae otherwise. But I didn’t know how to remove the madness otherwise. I asked August to help me. He hardly knew me, he did not like my family, he did not much like *me*. But he took me into his home. It changed everything. And he, you have to understand Jack, this isn’t the August you know now. I would be dead, were it not for him.’

Gwyn took in Jack’s stunned expression, and ran a hand through his hair.

‘August is a broken, mad creature. I cannot do for him what he did for me. I cannot bring him back from the madness. I can only provide a cage. Prevent more from being harmed, hurt or killed by him.’

Jack thought back to their encounter at the dome.

‘So Pitch told you what August was afraid of?’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded.

‘I think Pitch would rather not remember what he *does* remember. Pitch stated, quite plainly, that the Nightmare King stalked August out of his lake, approached him without his consent, learned to resist the compulsions that August strenuously used to keep him at bay, and then threatened to kill his brother if August didn’t go with him. Whatever ‘relationship’ they had, it unfolded out of these beginnings, and it lasted over a year. Afterwards, August seemed suddenly, and unusually determined to conquer the Unseelie Court. He is now, at his root, unstable. It makes his defeat almost certain.’

‘Does it?’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded pensively. ‘Can’t wait to see how you’re going to use

everyone against everyone this time.'

Gwyn raised his eyebrows, but didn't disagree.

'Oh god,' Jack said, 'this plan of yours sucks, doesn't it?'

'It will work. I never expected to be so sure of something, but I am sure. I am only now waiting for the individual pieces to fall into place. And, when it does work, we will have seen the Nightmare King and Augus both defeated, and – it will take some time – but the Kingdoms will stabilise; Unseelie and Seelie both.'

'You know, typically when someone is really confident about something, it means they're going to fail,' Jack said. 'You're jinxing it.'

'I am not jinxing a thing. I am the King of the Seelie Court. I do not *jinx* something when I declare my confidence in a plan. The Battle of Ara'Mathion proves that. And I believe I have erred along the way, many times. I overestimated Augus. I assumed that his immense power meant that he also could match that with battle strategy. I'm wrong. Augus is, I believe, far beyond recoverable. Whatever he was, whoever he was, that is not who he is now. He must be stopped. That his brother agrees with me is perhaps the clearest sign that Augus is past hope.'

'Ash what? Agrees with you?' Jack stared at him and Gwyn shifted on the snow.

'He's come to me and agreed to work with us to defeat Augus. Though, upon hearing the plan itself- He needs some more time to think it over. But he will come back. He will agree to it. Just like you will agree to being bait, once you've had some time to think about it.'

Jack blinked at him in shock, and then stood up quickly, pointing the staff at him.

'You did *not* just slip that into the conversation! *Bait?*'

'Think about it,' Gwyn said, and Jack glared at him.

'I already know I'm going to agree with your stupid idea, whatever it is. You think I don't want Augus *gone*? But, *bait*, I mean- You know that Pitch is going to *kill* you, right?'

'I was going to wait for you to agree, before bringing it up with him,' Gwyn said. He sighed. 'I'm not happy about it. And Pitch will be there. I will be there. Everything to ensure your safety will be in place. If I could think of an alternative, don't you think I'd rather do that? Depending on yourself and Ash and Pitch for something like this to work, when you're all potentially unstable elements, this isn't my preferred way of doing *anything*.'

Jack nodded, and then pressed a hand into his stomach as it tensed. He bowed over himself and groaned. Gwyn was up in an instant.

'What is it?'

'It's just hit me, you want to use me as *bait*. Oh god, I hate you. You're the worst. I hope I'm there to see Pitch bury that stupid axe in your back, because-'

'Once you're quite done with the hysterics...' Gwyn said, and Jack shook his head rapidly, focusing on his breathing.

'I *collapsed* yesterday!' Jack shouted, forcing himself to straighten. 'What use am I going to be? This isn't something I can just pull together because the 'mission' calls for it. I'm a mess. There's

no way, I...' Jack saw the look on Gwyn's face and sank back down to the ground again. 'You *want* me to be a mess. I think I'm starting to realise the way your mind works, Gwyn, and I wish I didn't, hey.'

Tension built inside of him. It was too much. He wanted to throw himself into sleep again. He wanted to not think about fae and their stupid battles, didn't want anything to do with the Seelie or Unseelie Courts ever again. He just wanted to be in a quiet forest, *left alone*, for a very long time. Maybe Mora could be there sometimes. And Pitch. He felt hysterical laughter bubbling up in the back of his throat and some of it escaped, bursting forth high and free. Jack clamped his mouth shut, shivered.

'Go away,' Jack said, looking up. 'Just *go away*. I *do* need to think about it.'

'Hear me out,' Gwyn said, holding up a hand. 'Hear me out. Listen to what I have planned, and then I'll leave.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, 'Go on. Tell me this plan of yours. Might as well, while I don't feel like I can fly away.'

'Excellent,' Gwyn said, and Jack rolled his eyes.

*Way to miss the point, Gwyn.*

\*

A couple of hours later, the sun was setting and Jack felt dazed. He was back in his room. Mora slept nearby. Gwyn could be as confident as he liked in his plan, but all Jack saw was about fifteen different points – at the very *least* – where things could go drastically wrong. At least the battle against the Nightmare King was, all things considered, pretty straight forward. Locate Nightmare King. Get weapons. Defeat him. Even that had seemed impossible at the time.

Jack stared at the ceiling. He hadn't seen North all day, but then he'd slept until Gwyn had arrived; and Jack didn't want to see North just yet. Jack wasn't ready for that expression on his face. He hadn't checked in with Pitch. It had been a while since he'd made time for Sandy.

He didn't want to think.

He rolled over and found the abyss of sleep waiting. It enfolded him like a cloak.

He bolted upright as a loud sound shook him awake. Pitch stood by the door he'd just slammed shut. He had a sour look on his face. Jack stared, disoriented. It was light outside, early morning. When had that happened?

'If you're going to sleep your life away, why do you not at least bother Sanderson with a request for good dreams?'

Jack rubbed at his face clumsily, shook his head.

'Mora,' Jack said, and Pitch huffed a laugh.

'No. Try again. Mora doesn't exclusively feed off your nightmares any longer. And don't you recall that Sanderson gave her that ridiculous, twee star on her forehead so that she could feed on your good dreams too?'

Jack looked over at Mora. He did remember.

Pitch's question was one he didn't know how to answer. The fact was, it had never really occurred to him to ask Sandy for good dreams. What would he ask for? Every good dream he ever had was still twinged with bitter-sweetness, either in the dream itself, or upon awakening. His sister had died. Jamie had died. Pitch had been taken away. Jack's powers were once again not the carefree thrill they used to be, because they were either too weak, or as it turned out, too strong.

'One would think you didn't want to feel good,' Pitch said, walking further into the room and sitting down on the edge of Jack's bed. 'One would think, perhaps, that you didn't know *how*.'

'It's too early for this,' Jack muttered and Pitch shrugged.

'Oh, I don't know, you did just get a good night's sleep after all, didn't you? Feel well-rested? Do you know how much of that forty eight hour deadline I have left to make the light?'

Jack realised that Pitch was annoyed. Jack had just spent a great deal of the past two days asleep. He opened his mouth to apologise, and Pitch shook his head with a curt movement.

'I have only one idea, and I'm looking forward to it less than you are. I'd like an answer though. Why don't you ask Sanderson for good dreams? It's clear you're trying to escape what is happening in your life, because it's not as though you *need* the sleep.'

Jack got up and picked up his staff. He pressed it absently into the wall and frost spiralled out, decorating the wood panels beside his bed.

'I'm not used to asking anyone about that kind of stuff,' Jack said, smiling ruefully. 'And I'm not sure what I would dream about anyway. And I don't really want to bother him.'

'May I remind you that the inane twaddle he sends to the children and the other Guardians is actually his *job*? His bread and butter? I assure you, he gets the most disproportionate satisfaction from doing it.'

Jack pointed at Mora.

'He exhausted himself bringing her back for me. I just feel like-'

'You didn't even realise it was an option, did you?' Pitch said, rolling his eyes. 'This brings me to a second point. You should consider telling him about how many gestures of comfort have been ruined for you. He can help you directly. Just as nightmares have the power to strengthen an original trauma, good dreams can do the opposite. Why do you think he was always such a thorn in the Nightmare King's side?'

Jack stared at him.

'I know you don't want to talk about it, but it's not as though Sandy can tell anyone, and he's no wilting flower, Jack.'

Jack took a deep breath and was going to reply, when Pitch stood.

'I need to retrieve my axe. Today, we are going hunting.'

'Hunting?' Jack said blankly.

'Mm, hunting down *fun*.' Pitch made a rich sound of disgust. 'Do you remember that once I actually used to be a war general? I can hardly recall, with what my life has become.'

‘You probably don’t remember because there’s no room in your head with all the complaints you store in there,’ Jack said, following Pitch to his room and shaking his sleep-rumpled hair back into place with the help of a quick gust of wind.

Pitch retrieved his axe and Jack wondered if he’d been secretly training with it somewhere. He gripped it with familiarity.

‘So this idea of yours,’ Jack said, ‘What is it?’

Pitch beckoned Jack over with a single finger. Jack looked at it and then shook his head.

*Sometimes you’re still actually a little creepy.*

Jack walked over and hesitantly placed his hand on Pitch’s robe. Pitch placed his hand over Jack’s shoulders, and Jack shivered, surprised that the touch didn’t feel abrasive. The grip tightened, and they whisked off through darkness.

\*

The first thing Jack heard when they landed was the sound of children shrieking happily nearby. They cried out to each other, laughed, screamed in delight. Jack turned in the snow. Just over a small hill, children were having a snowball fight. Jack blinked to see them. It had been such a long time since he’d had anything to do with snowball fights, he felt a small quickening in his heart. One side of his mouth turned up to see them.

‘Can they see you?’ Pitch asked and Jack shrugged.

‘Maybe not? Not as many can, these days. It sort of peaked after about a decade, and then ever since then, it’s more like- There’s a few really loyal children here and there, but otherwise not so much.’

Jack flew into the air, waved his staff, and none of the children noticed. Not a single one looked at him.

‘Nope,’ Jack said.

He tried to make it sound flippant, but it was a harsh reminder of how things used to be.

If Pitch thought this was going to help him make snowballs, then he was mistaken. Fun felt like a lie. It made the spirits who met him get annoyed at him.

And it reminded him of Jamie. His first believer. His *best* believer.

‘I think we should go,’ Jack said.

‘It’s a sad and sorry day indeed, when I have a greater sense of fun than you do.’

‘Then it’s a sad and sorry day,’ Jack said, flat. He was willing to try, he *was*, but he just didn’t think he had the snowballs in him. It made him feel terrible, but it wasn’t like they didn’t have alternatives. North had made the weapons that amplified the light, and Gwyn could still make the light, so...

‘Jack,’ Pitch said quietly, ‘will you at least try?’

Jack looked back at the children and shrugged.



‘I don’t know what you want from me, Pitch. I just don’t *feel* it.’

‘I think it’s there,’ Pitch said. ‘I think- Here, would it help if I made an utter fool of myself?’

Pitch dropped his axe to the snow, where it landed with a *thunk!* He picked up a handful of snow and then started packing it into a snowball. Jack watched as Pitch’s hands shaped the snow. It was obviously something he wasn’t used to doing.

Pitch drew his arm back and threw the snowball at Jack before he had time to react. Jack took it full in the shoulder. A blaze of pain spiralled through him.

‘*Ow!*’ Jack shouted, and then a small burst of surprised laughter spilled from his lips. ‘*Pitch*, it’s supposed to be a lightly packed snowball, not some...ice-projectile. Honestly. Kids would *die*, if you played with them.’

‘Overpopulation *is* a serious issue,’ Pitch said, straight-faced, and Jack rolled his eyes.

Pitch bent down and started again, and Jack rubbed at his shoulder absently. That was going to bruise, even if it would heal quickly. The whole thing had been mostly ice.

‘I’m not doing this,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded as he worked on packing snow into a second snowball. Jack stared incredulously. ‘Also you’re doing it wrong. And you look ridiculous.’

‘At least I’m making an *effort*,’ Pitch said, hurling the second snowball at Jack.

Jack dodged it, and watched as it sank almost a metre into a snow bank. Another ice projectile. Those things were dangerous!

‘You want effort?’ Jack said, bending down and finding the snow easily. It practically leapt into his hands. He formed it quickly and threw it, hitting Pitch in the arm. It exploded into a mess of snow, and Pitch flicked it off with the backs of his fingers, a small smile playing around his mouth.

‘I hardly felt it,’ Pitch said, and Jack threw his arms up, exasperated.

‘You’re not supposed to feel it in the way that you intended! Honestly, Pitch, you’d kill children. Don’t even think about throwing any at those kids over there.’

Jack looked back over at them. Two twin girls were running after an older boy, arms stocked, throwing snowball after snowball. Jack winced as something flickered in his heart, and his arm dropped, he wrapped it around his ribs. He didn’t feel well.

Something was wrong.

‘Pitch, I don’t want to do this,’ Jack said, quietly.

‘They’re just snowballs, Jack,’ Pitch said, ‘and we don’t have to play with the children. After all, you’re a *Guardian*, protecting them from the menace of my snowballs.’

Jack smirked.

‘You can joke,’ he said. ‘But even without the living shadows and the Nightmare Men, it turns out that you’re just not children safe. You should come with a childproof lock or something.’

‘I do. The childproof lock is that I can’t stand children.’

‘No,’ Jack said, disbelieving, and Pitch smiled at Jack’s expression.

‘Quite,’ Pitch said. ‘They’re sticky, shrill, and the only one that I could ever stand was my own.’

Pitch winced, his expression sobered. He frowned and picked up some more snow, but as he made the snowball, he looked unhappy. Jack couldn’t leave it like that. He bent down and picked up more snow. He threw the snowball and it landed, hitting Pitch’s shoulder. Pitch looked up, raised his eyebrows, and then threw his own.

Jack wasn’t fast enough, even hopping into the winds, and it hit him in the leg. It hurt far less, and Jack whooped.

‘That’s better!’ he encouraged, and Pitch made another snowball. Jack, not wanting to be outdone, did the same. He waved his staff, raised some snow to hide behind, and then pointed his staff at Pitch, making the same for him. Jack hid behind his cover and picked up a snowball, blew on it without thinking, but knew that it was only air even as he popped up and threw it at the bit of Pitch’s head he could see. It landed, snow sticking in his coarse hair.

‘I’m not ready!’ Pitch called back, and Jack laughed.

‘You’ve really never done this before, have you?’

Jack ducked when two snowballs hurtled at him. One after the other. They exploded over him, and he didn’t bother shaking the snow out of his hair. He threw three in quick succession and then quickly flew out from behind his cover while Pitch was hiding. He sped in a wide loop towards Pitch, approaching from behind.

He was looking at Pitch’s back, watching him furtively make more snowballs. Jack swallowed down a chuckle, and magicked more snowballs into existence. He picked one up and blew on it instinctively, and felt something ancient and familiar move through him. He threw the snowball at Pitch’s back.

It landed square, and Pitch whirled, a mix of outraged and amused. He laughed, golden eyes gleaming bright.

‘That’s against the rules, I’m sure,’ Pitch said, and Jack grinned.

‘Hey, I’m Jack Frost, I make the rules when it comes to snowball fights,’ Jack said. ‘You don’t make them fast enough, do you? Here, let me at least give you a fighting chance.’

Jack waved his staff again and a pile of fresh snowballs appeared by Pitch’s knee.

Pitch picked one up immediately and ditched it before Jack could get out of the way. It hit him square in the chest, and Jack felt a rush of something warm move through his entire body. It felt...

...Like *fun*.

Jack stared at the pile of snowballs he’d made by Pitch’s knee, and then dropped to the ground. He couldn’t look away. His breaths came shallow, fast. His hand clutched at his chest.

It felt like fun, but it...didn’t feel right.

Pitch was standing up in an instant. Jack couldn’t look at him.

‘Uh,’ Jack said, and then swallowed hard. His heart *hurt*. He took several quick steps backwards. He felt a fluttering inside of his chest, beating hard against the walls of ice he’d created around the centre of himself. It felt bad. It was terrifying.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said quickly. ‘Jack, it’s okay.’

Jack took several more steps backwards and then his staff fell out of his hand. He wrapped both arms around his ribs and tried to catch his breath. There was a crushing weight, thick and stifling. It was so familiar. It had been the companion of fun all along. He made a small, thin noise, and shook his head rapidly.

‘Uh,’ he said again, trying to think of *something* to say. The weight inside of him was too heavy. All his life he’d been so light on the winds, but now he felt the weight of every one of his years. It pushed him down to his knees, forced his head down.

Jack gasped in horror, forced himself upright, stumbled backwards.

‘Jack, it’s okay,’ Pitch said, reaching out.

‘Something’s wrong with me,’ Jack said, voice hoarse.

It was too familiar. Something cold and hard was cracking inside himself, and he wanted to claw the whole bloody mess of it out of his chest. He dug his fingers into his ribs, accidentally pressing into one of the scars that August had given him, cried out. He didn’t want *any* of this anymore. He couldn’t face the hugeness of it, he *couldn’t*.

‘No, Jack, it’s-’

‘I don’t want to feel like this anymore!’ Jack shouted, and his throat closed on a sob. He spun away from Pitch, shook his head rapidly. Something shattered within. He kept his mouth closed around the next sob, but his chest hurt too much. He opened his mouth on a gasp and wiped at cold, saltwater tears.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, so gently that Jack couldn’t stand it. He didn’t want gentle. He wanted to not feel like this. Not ever again. He didn’t want this anymore.

‘I hate this!’ Jack shouted, over the sound of children shrieking happily in the distance. ‘Everything I’ve ever had, *everything*, it’s gone away, or it’s been taken away, or it’s not going to last. They didn’t see me for hundreds of years and I tried so hard. *So hard.*’

‘Jack, come here,’ Pitch said, and Jack felt a warm hand on his shoulder. He tried to shake it off, but it returned. Pitch curled soothing fingers around him. ‘Jack, it’s going to be okay.’

Jack sobbed. The sounds horrified him. He didn’t do things like this. And if he did, it was years ago, before anyone believed in him. It had been a private grief, because no one could see him. How many nights had he spent in those first decades, going slowly insane, convinced that he was a ghost in purgatory, knowing it was useless to cry quietly at night and yet unable to help himself, excoriated by loneliness and ostracism and not understanding *why*.

‘I tried so hard,’ Jack whimpered, and Pitch was tugging him closer, whispering soothing things that Jack couldn’t catch because the noise in his head so loud. Jack hiccupped out a strangled sound, tried to close his mouth around the pain, but couldn’t.

‘Jack, it’s going to be okay,’ Pitch said, and Jack started to bend double again, only to find himself pulled around into Pitch’s chest, an arm going tight around him.

‘All I had was the fun to keep me company,’ Jack said, knees buckling, and Pitch knelt quickly, joining him on the snowy ground. ‘I don’t want to go back to feeling like that again. I can’t do it again. Having fun. Being alone.’

Jack clutched Pitch's robes in his hands until his hands hurt.

'Losing *you*,' Jack whispered.

Admitting it out loud was worse than keeping it in, and he placed a hand over his mouth to try and keep the sounds inside. He was ashamed, embarrassed, he was supposed to be fun and bright and cheerful, not *this*. He shook uncontrollably, and Pitch's arms firmed around his back, an unwavering warmth.

'He hurt me,' Jack managed, not even sure if Pitch could understand him, and not sure if he wanted him to. 'He wouldn't let me go, and...you weren't there. I called your name, I *screamed* for you, and you weren't there. I-'

Jack broke. He convulsed on himself, and Pitch bowed over him, making a small, fractious sound. Pitch hugged Jack closer, then rubbed slow circles in the space between his shoulder blades. Jack's heart felt too big for his chest, and he kept one hand pressed up near his face, and the other clawed into his own sweatshirt, as though he could brace himself against the pain. It didn't work.

He'd been alone for so long. He'd tried so hard.

When Jack realised how close he'd truly come to losing Pitch, he shook, a wave of new sobs broke out of him. Pitch crooned to him, voice also broken and wet, shuddering with his own pain. The hand rubbing circles into his back simply wrapped around his side and pulled him close. Jack burrowed into Pitch's robes.

He'd never wanted Pitch to see him like this, but when he realised that Pitch was also crying, he focused on the warmth around him, the snow melting underneath Pitch's robe. Waves of sobs ebbed and flowed. He gasped for breath. Tried to speak sentences that wouldn't form, tried to express a pain that he couldn't express. His face was covered in rime, his body hurt.

Eventually the crying ebbed more than it flowed, and Jack slid his hand underneath Pitch's robe, found his undershirt, felt the heat of his skin beneath.

'I'm a pretty simple guy,' Jack said, voice strained and tear-filled. 'I just wanted people to like me. To believe in me. And then I finally, *finally* got that, and I feel like everything since- What if I wanted it too much? What if I'm being punished for-'

'No,' Pitch said, emphatically. 'Also, I have been part of that 'everything since.' And I am not a punishment.'

Jack laughed, the sound more sob than mirth. He squeezed his eyes shut and wished he could disappear into Pitch's warmth.

'I should have seen the lake,' Jack said. 'I should have seen it. The top was melted, and everything else was frozen. I should have taken you seriously when you told me how dangerous he was, and I *tried*, it just-'

'Jack,' Pitch said, 'blaming yourself is normal, but it still doesn't make it your fault.'

Jack turned and looked up. Pitch was gazing down at him, tear-tracks on his face catching in the morning light. Pitch made a grimace of sympathy when he saw Jack's face, shifted his arms so that he could reach forward with the backs of his fingers. He paused once, asking for silent permission, and when Jack didn't say anything, he stroked away some of Jack's tears. The backs of his fingers became a thumb, smoothing them away.

‘My Jack,’ Pitch said softly, an endearment that sent a bloom of warmth through Jack’s chest, soothed at the jagged rips inside of him. ‘How much you’ve been through.’

‘Yeah, coming from *you*, who has like been through way more and-’

‘I’ve felt the depth and breadth of your terror. I know how serious these matters are.’

Jack frowned, and then his forehead relaxed when Pitch trailed his knuckles across it. Everything about Pitch was warm. Even though Jack ran colder than he used to, his body temperature was already rising from having been held by Pitch for so long.

‘You needed this,’ Pitch said softly.

‘I know,’ Jack admitted, wishing Pitch were wrong. ‘I just...’

‘Your fun was tied up with your grief. You couldn’t permit one without feeling the other.’

Jack nodded, absorbed that information, and knew it was true. A deep well of sadness had *always* been tied up in his sense of fun. After all, he’d saved his sister’s life, but paid a high price for the game that had allowed it. He’d used fun to help children enjoy themselves, only to spend nights and mornings alone, unseen, unwanted by the world.

Jack blinked in sudden realisation.

‘Wait,’ Jack said. ‘You *knew*?’

‘Yes, I suspected,’ Pitch said.

‘You knew?’ Jack pushed himself up in Pitch’s lap and stared at him, face to face. ‘You brought me here and did the snowball thing knowing it would make me cry?’

Pitch’s eyes widened in surprise, and then he shrugged a little and laughed quietly, the sound small and broken.

‘I didn’t know what I was doing, I only had an idea that if I-’

Jack stared at him in shock, and then thumped him on the shoulder.

‘You’re evil!’

Pitch managed a look of mock-affront, and then smiled.

‘Ex-evil, thank you very much.’

‘Ex-evil,’ Jack said, slumping against Pitch, exhausted. ‘Yeah, right. Pull the other one.’

Pitch moved his hands, stroking them down Jack’s spine carefully.

‘Look,’ Pitch said, regarding what he was doing, ‘If I draw your attention to it, will you have to move away?’

Jack shivered at the rich tone of his voice and then shook his head. The touch was unerring, pressing central lines of focus and heat down Jack’s back. It reminded Jack of all the times Pitch had placed a hand or finger over the centre of Jack’s chest and drawn a line down, helping him concentrate, helping him be present. It was a touch he was grateful for.

Jack reached up blindly and wiped away Pitch's tears, before wrapping his arms around him. In the depths of his heart, he felt a small flicker of light beside the hardness of his resolve.

He would always have a place for fun, would always have a place for the children – but his centre was changing, and he knew he wouldn't return to fun or resolve again.

Jack pressed his lips to Pitch's cheek. The daring of it made him shiver, and he paused, checking with himself to see if it was okay. It seemed like it was. He kissed Pitch's cheek gently, and Pitch's hands pressed harder where they traced along his back. Pitch didn't know it, but he was coasting along part of Jack's scar from the time he'd carried his sword. One day Pitch would find out about that, but not today.

'And the sadness?' Jack said, and Pitch sighed.

'Grief does what it does. It may never leave you. Even in a hundred or two hundred years, when your life looks different, is more what you wanted from it, the sadness may be there. Terrible injustices have been done to you.'

'Okay, okay,' Jack said, laughing. 'I get it. Bad things happened. Jack's sad.'

Jack rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. Pitch's tears had long since turned to frost crystals on his fingers, but Jack still felt the heat of them.

'You're sad too,' Jack said, and Pitch stopped stroking Jack's spine, and simply pulled him close. They didn't say anything at all. Children giggled and laughed and shrieked nearby. One of the twin girls was crying, 'We got you! We got you!' and the boy muttered some choice words at them. He must have gone after them with his own snowballs, because the shrieking started again.

'How come you don't throw tantrums about it?' Jack said, beginning to feel uncomfortable over his outburst. Pitch laughed deep in his chest.

'If you'll recall, I buried an axe in a wall so close to your face that a part of your hair still isn't the same length as the rest of it.'

'Believe me, I remember,' Jack said, and then laughed. He drew back slowly, and looked at Pitch. 'And I also remember how you had this idea to have a snowball fight with me, so you could make me *cry*.'

Pitch leaned forwards and pressed a quick kiss to Jack's lips, and then leaned back, smiling in satisfaction when Jack blinked in surprise.

'It wasn't with the specific purpose of making you cry, Jack. Only to learn what was frozen so deeply inside of you. But do you feel it?' Pitch said. 'Your fears are quieter.'

Jack realised Pitch was right. Whatever walls had thawed out over his heart, it left him feeling less overwhelmed than usual. The fears were still there, they would always be there, but they *were* quieter.

'I guess I should see about making those snowballs again, so we can see if you can make the light.'

Jack didn't want to let go, and he tilted his head up nervously, hoping Pitch would respond. He closed his eyes and felt the presence of Pitch's mouth near his, before warm lips touched his cold ones. He opened his mouth, tasted the salt of tears, and couldn't tell who it came from. Maybe both of them. He licked quickly, shyly, at Pitch's lower lip, and Pitch exhaled hard against him.

‘You’re not ready for this,’ Pitch said against his mouth, and Jack shivered.

‘Maybe not all of it. But the kissing is okay.’

Pitch opened his mouth over Jack’s and licked a slow, hot stripe against his bottom lip. He opened his mouth, a silent, warm invitation, and Jack curled his tongue inside, feeling his face flush. Pitch tasted like salt, warmth and smokiness. He made a hungry sound when Jack slid the tip of his tongue underneath Pitch’s, and Jack hummed.

He withdrew slowly, breathing hard, arousal growing. He looked at the embroidery on Pitch’s robe, tried to concentrate, and then leaned in and stole another kiss. It was sweeter, their lips closed, but still moist. Pitch rubbed his lips against Jack’s deliberately as he withdrew, and Jack inhaled sharply.

‘We should do this,’ Jack said softly. ‘The snowball thing.’

‘We should,’ Pitch said. And then he groaned. ‘We *should*.’

Jack pushed himself upright, was surprised when Pitch placed a gentle hand underneath his elbow, helping him. Jack felt shaken, but steady on his feet. He picked up some snow and his magic formed it into the right shape.

Pitch walked over to the axe where he’d dropped it on the ground. Jack walked over to his staff and picked it up, spinning it in his fingers.

‘So, same as last time? You do drills and I throw things at you until light appears?’

Pitch’s head tilted as he shot a withering look at Jack.

‘You always phrase things so eloquently.’

Jack shrugged, looked at the snowball. He blew over it and nothing happened. He blinked at it and realised that just because he’d uncovered the fun, didn’t mean it would come as easily as it used to. He looked inside his heart and found it alongside the hard, icy place where his resolve rested. It was a delicate thing, ephemeral and playful. It burned bright in front of him, and then jumped away as he reached for it. He opened his mind to it, and it came forwards, a tiny, leaping blue flame.

Jack blew over the snowball and it glowed with energy. Jack felt a grin spreading across his face in response.

‘Head’s up!’ Jack shouted, and threw the snowball hard, even as Pitch started a drill with the axe that Jack hadn’t seen before. Pitch had *definitely* been practicing.

Pitch didn’t stop, a look of fierce concentration on his face. Jack created more snowballs, flew closer, infused all of them with that flickering, mischievous warmth. One after another, he threw them at Pitch, showering him with snow.

Jack threw another snowball, and suddenly blazes of light emitted strongly from both axe blades. Jack whooped and Pitch ignored him, focused on what he was doing. He stepped through the drill with confidence and power, and the light maintained itself the entire time. It flickered and wavered twice, and then surged forth, stronger than ever. Mellifluous and bright, it turned the axe into a giant butterfly of golden light.

Jack stared in amazement. Pitch could say what he liked about the weapon; it looked incredible.

Pitch swung the axe back over his shoulder, then stepped into a spin, bringing it forwards. A huge blaze of golden light detached from the weapon and sailed forth through the air, coalescing into an incandescent ball before dissolving where it impacted against a hill of snow. And in the distance, the shrieking suddenly stopped and a child shouted:

‘I saw a shooting star!’

Jack beamed at Pitch, and Pitch dropped the head of his axe to the ground and leaned on the handle.

‘Adequate,’ he said, smiling with satisfaction.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'A Second Scarf,' Jack and Pitch need to visit Makara for another scarf...because of reasons. And Jack is getting thoroughly tired of both the nightmares, and not being able to be physically close to Pitch in the way he wants to be...



## A Second Scarf

### Chapter Notes

Ahhhhh thank you so much for all your comments and lovely attention this fic has been getting. I am beyond flabbergasted, and often very speechless about it. I never thought this fic would get popular. And I know I still have a lot of flaws as a writer, and you guys help me motivated and be more diligent about what I'm putting out there for you. So thank you. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The look on Pitch's face as Gwyn mentioned using Jack as a 'diversion' – *nice avoidance of the word 'bait' there, Gwyn* – was thunderous. They walked through the Seelie Court, the energy of it chafing at Jack. He was not happy to be back, but Gwyn was so busy now that he couldn't afford to spend hours away from his people.

'A *diversion*,' Pitch said, and Jack resisted the urge to pull on Gwyn's sleeve and point out that he was right; Gwyn was about to get murdered.

'You want to use him as *bait*?' Pitch said, incredulous.

Gwyn pushed aside a curtain of thick, lush vines and showed them into a quieter room, free from observers. In front of them, a room of giant fungi and strange smooth outcrops of granite, moss clinging verdant, sprawling across the ground. It smelled damp and fertile. In the corner, tiny fragile plants grew, with inflorescences of tiny green lights.

'Yes. I do,' Gwyn said. 'Defeating August is nothing more than having the right people there at the right time.'

They had been talking over the plan for more than an hour. Hearing it broken down, realising so much of it was dependent on Ash's agreement to see through his side of the bargain – which Jack knew he would find difficult – still didn't fill Jack with confidence. He couldn't even wrap his head around the fact that Gwyn wanted Jack there in front of August, wanted him to stand and let himself be compelled.

The worst part was that Jack could see the logic of it. The worst part was that Jack had agreed to it, heart pounding in his chest, wondering if at some point he'd cracked his sanity apart and left it in pieces in the Workshop.

'It has to be this way,' Jack said, seeing Pitch's stubborn expression grow into something murderous. Pitch looked at him in shock, shifted the axe in his grip; ever since their trip to the snowfield, Pitch had taken to carrying it with him everywhere.

'Jack, I will not let-'

'You can't stop me from doing this,' Jack said, 'It's my choice. I don't like it, I mean, *duh*, but...we can't keep going on like this. I don't like living in the Workshop. Gwyn looks like he hasn't slept in six months. I don't want to hide anymore. I'm a frost spirit, Pitch, I'm not supposed to live like this. I'd rather throw my lot in with Gwyn's stupid idea, than spend the next six months trapped

like some animal, waiting to see what happens next.'

Pitch looked at him for a long time, lips thin, considering. He turned to Gwyn, sighed.

'If you just expect me to stand there, *passively*, while Jack is led into the fray as *bait*, then-'

Gwyn grinned, the expression all teeth and predatory cunning.

'Oh no, I have plans for you, Pitch. How unstable have you been feeling lately? How much of that darkness do you have left? What would you say to putting that to a purpose?'

Jack's eyes widened. That didn't sound...like a good idea at all, but Pitch's eyes lit with an eagerness that made his eyes practically glow.

'Revenge,' Pitch said bluntly, and Gwyn nodded, a cold satisfaction on his face.

'If you can put aside your distaste for what the Nightmare King has done long enough to see how effective his techniques were when dealing with August, we-'

'*Oh*,' Pitch said, and then instead of looking horrified, or perturbed, as Jack expected, he looked hungry for something Jack didn't understand.

'What?' Jack said, wanting them to elaborate. But whatever Pitch and Gwyn were communicating silently to each other, Jack wasn't a part of it. He clearly didn't understand their weird, creepy army telepathy. Jack floated over and perched on one of the giant mushrooms. He tried icing it, and then stopped abruptly when it squealed in distress.

'Whoops,' Jack looked over to Pitch and Gwyn. 'You both like this 'destroying people' thing a little bit too much, if you ask me.'

Jack wanted August gone, buried in sixty feet of soil if he had any say about it. He didn't want to share a world with the Each Uisge. But he'd felt Ash's genuine distress when he'd talked about his brother. Jack knew something about that too. It was Ash, attempting to chain-smoke his anguish away, that made Jack all too aware that nothing was black and white.

'Since he's already made a scarf for you once, and you clearly survived the experience of being in his presence, I'd like for you to visit Makara again today.'

Jack's heart leapt. He smiled. He didn't really want another scarf, but the one that Gwyn wanted was one that shouldn't impact Pitch at all, he hoped. It would be nice to see Makara again.

'You'll need to take him,' Gwyn added to Pitch. 'Since I can't teleport him there myself.'

'I can't say I'm looking forward to that,' Pitch said, and then narrowed his eyes at Gwyn. 'You cannot visit Makara?'

'No, it's not safe for me.'

'All you have to do is not lie, and things are fine,' Jack said, and then looked at the expression on Gwyn's face and raised his eyebrows. 'Seriously? Well, anyway, *I'm* looking forward to seeing him, even if you're both so weird about it.'

\*

'It's interesting that Gwyn can't see Makara, yeah?' Jack said, and Pitch shrugged.

‘It means he knows that he would have to lie about something in advance.’

‘Yeah, maybe how much of a douche he is. He seems determined to hide that from everyone. Badly.’

Jack thought Pitch would agree with him, even laugh, but Pitch didn’t respond. When Jack looked at him, Pitch was pensively looking out into the middle distance.

‘Not everyone is blessed with the ability to have such openness, Jack,’ he said, finally.

‘Are you going to be okay seeing him, then? I mean, if you think you can’t, then-’

‘It’s not a problem,’ Pitch said, and then paused, looking around them. ‘I would like to leave sooner rather than later, and take my chances with Makara. I feel eyes upon us.’

*Great.*

Jack stepped in close to Pitch, easier than it used to be. Proximity was something he’d craved for so long, and now that it was something he could have in small doses, he wanted so much more. To slide his hands into Pitch’s robe, to wrap arms around him.

‘Do you know how to get there?’ Jack said, absently.

Pitch’s hands tightened on his back in silent answer. As they dissolved into shadow, Jack wondered when it was that he’d gotten used to this strange, threatening method of travel.

\*

It was humid in the underground cavern, heat sticking to the moisture in the air, the sound of water lapping at the looming, carved stone walls. The lake itself, huge and extending far beyond Jack’s sight, made faint music as droplets of water plinked back into the deep, creating ripples and causing curious fish to swim up and nibble at nothing. Giant crocodile heads with angry eyes and elephant ears were perched on peacocks with snarling demon faces in one pillar. In another, a giant serpentine creature with a thousand elephant legs made up an entire pillar of its own.

All gifts of honesty to Makara, the vahana of Ganga.

Pitch seemed happy to stay in the shadows by the wall, but Jack wanted to see Makara again, and made for the central dais where Makara received his clients.

Jack saw him leaning over a fruit bowl, plucking a pale blue grape off a multi-coloured bunch. He was naked as always, except for his golden jewellery – his crown and braces and cuffs. His peacock tail was more resplendent than ever, flatteringly lit in the shifting light. Makara must have known he was approaching, with his ability to read the truths from people’s minds. He turned and offered a pale yellow grape to Jack, smiling as he approached.

Jack smiled back. The last time he’d seen Makara, he had been convinced he was going to die, convinced that he would never see him again.

‘Thanks,’ Jack said, taking the grape. ‘How’ve you been?’

‘In all ways, well, thank you,’ Makara said, looking quietly over Jack’s shoulder as Pitch approached.

Jack turned to see Pitch staring up in horror, at nothing. And Jack’s eyes widened when he realised

that Pitch was seeing *his* version of Makara.

‘Oh, that’s really trippy,’ Jack said, looking up twenty feet in the air to see a whole lot of darkness, but no Makara. The Makara that Jack saw was tall, but a perfectly reasonable size.

‘I am glad that you are no longer wearing the scarf I made for you,’ Makara said, following Pitch’s line of sight and smiling quietly.

‘That scarf was an abomination,’ Pitch said, and Makara nodded in acknowledgement.

‘It is not for me to talk someone out of a scarf, but to heed their request. Just as now, I will heed it again. I know what you need this for, my friend,’ Makara said, turning back to Jack. ‘I will help you. I doubt August will be able to read your fears quite so clearly, but as he does have a capacity to feel them out, a scarf would make sure.’

Jack followed Makara up the three stone steps to the table where he worked, and watched him pull an assortment of pre-made silk scarves out from a green, woven basket beneath his table. He lay five out, touching each one with discerning fingers, and then selected a pale green from the group. He held it up to the light and then spread it out.

‘As this one is much less complicated than the one I made for you before, I do not need to weave it for you. Only write the words.’

‘I...don’t want to wear it until I need it,’ Jack said hesitantly.

‘You know how dangerous they can be, now,’ Makara said, selecting a fine brush from a glass of brushes of many thicknesses. He lifted a ceramic lid from a shallow dish and revealed the magical silver paint he used. Jack wondered where he got it from. He wondered where the root of Makara’s magic lay. Was it in the scarf? The paint? Or in the act of Makara painting the words himself? ‘But there is good news, Jack. You may take the scarf off until you need it. I only need to affix it to you the first time. My friend, you may do whatever you like with it after that.’

Makara looked over at Pitch, whose eyes were skating to the large creature that Pitch was seeing behind Jack. His hand twitched on his axe, but otherwise he was calm, if obviously disturbed.

‘But this scarf will not affect you or your companion, I assure you.’

‘How’s your garden going?’ Jack said, picking another grape from the bunch; a lilac one this time. The burst of sweetness was surprisingly floral, a completely different flavour to the one he’d had before. Makara looked over at him and smiled warmly, gestured gracefully for Jack to help himself to more of the fruit.

‘Very well. It is kind of you to ask.’

Jack smiled as he picked a dark, opaque green grape off the bottom of the bunch and bit into it. It was a rich chocolate peppermint, and Jack wished there was more of them, but each grape was a different colour and flavour.

It was strange, watching Makara work. Jack felt easier in Makara’s home than he did in the Workshop, but as he watched Pitch, it was obvious that Jack was the only one. Jack had no doubt that Makara could be very monstrous, he’d heard that growl last time, he could see the carvings on the pillars and the walls for himself. Maybe he did look like some hybrid elephant-peacock-crocodile creature. Jack didn’t care.

‘So, in exchange, do I just do...like I did last time? Do we both do that?’ Jack said, and Makara

shook his head slowly.

‘As the scarf is for you, Jack Frost, you are the only one who need offer your impression of me, in a method of your own choosing. I confess vanity, I have been quite looking forward to seeing your skill again now that you are stronger.’

‘Ha, yeah, *stronger*,’ Jack said and then rolled his eyes. ‘Tell me about it.’

Pitch walked carefully up to the table, looked down at the scarf that Makara was painting, a faint distaste on his face. Makara didn’t look up, but his hand slowed, and he took a deep breath.

‘You think I should have denied him the last scarf.’

‘You deny *most* people scarves,’ Pitch said. ‘I’m not sure why-’

‘Jack’s need was great,’ Makara said, interrupting him smoothly, though his voice took on a harder edge. ‘I do not regret that it was difficult for you. I made that scarf well, and it did everything I intended it to do. The energy here, it makes you uncomfortable. I would advise you to watch your words around me.’

Jack’s frowned. He found himself in the odd position of feeling strangely protective towards Pitch. After all, it couldn’t be easy for him, a reader of fear in front of someone who stifled Pitch’s ability with every swipe of his brush.

‘How ironic that you cannot tolerate dishonesty, and yet create items that facilitate such dishonesty.’

Makara paused and frowned. His eyes narrowed as he scrutinised Pitch, the tension ratcheting up in the room. But then he only sighed and went back to his work.

‘Yes, that is quite ironic.’

Pitch wandered away, after that, to stare at an elaborately carved pillar.

Jack watched Makara work and then walked away from the dais, to where the underground lake met the heavy, stone slabs of the floor. He dipped his fingers into the water absently, and a shoal of tiny fish came up and nibbled at his fingertips. He lifted his hand in surprise, and they swam away quickly, leaving only ripples in their absence.

Jack looked over at Makara quietly working, and then pointed his staff to one side, creating the frost-Makara with quiet ease. This was not like last time, when it required all of his concentration. Makara’s doppelganger sprang up in particles of ice, gleaming in the light, casting a faint shadow on the ground.

‘That explains a lot,’ Pitch said softly, looking at Jack’s moving frost sculpture. Jack sent the frost-Makara to walk, complete with his careful steps and the swishing of his tail, up to the dais. Frost-Makara quietly watched the real Makara work, and then ran his hand languidly along the table. Makara looked up at it and beamed, then went back to work again.

‘Yeah, it’s pretty obvious you don’t see Makara like that,’ Jack said, and Pitch laughed out a single breath.

‘No, emphatically *not*.’

Pitch watched the frost-Makara with a sour expression on his face, and then his mouth pulled into

a troubled frown. A strange distress pulled at Pitch's brow, changed his posture.

Jack looked between Pitch and the frost-Makara, a chill moved through him. The last time Pitch had seen Jack make a person out of his frost...

'I didn't even think,' Jack said, and Pitch looked at him, face etched with a sadness made sharper by the dim lighting in the cavern.

'What does this remind you of?' Makara asked Pitch from the table, gesturing at the frost-Makara, and Jack frowned. Makara would know perfectly well what the frost-Makara was reminding Pitch of. Did he want to see if Pitch would lie to him? Why would he do that?

Pitch paused, and then his shoulders rose and fell on a slow breath.

'My daughter,' Pitch said softly. Makara kept painting letters onto the scarf, and then stopped and looked at the frost-Makara with a strange longing on his face.

'You may let this image go, Jack Frost,' Makara said. 'You have done more than enough to earn this scarf.'

Jack felt a wave of relief move through him. He let the frost-Makara dissolve into particles, and decided he would have to come back and make frost-Makara again while Pitch wasn't there. Pitch didn't look pleased that the frost-Makara was gone, only pensive.

He wanted to fly over and console him, somehow. But he didn't know if Pitch would want that, here, in front of Makara. Pitch was someone who – Jack knew – liked to hide his vulnerabilities from others, even if Makara could peel them all directly out of Pitch's head without trying.

'It is done,' Makara said, cleaning the brush in some water. He pressed water out of it on the glass rim, and then laid the brush flat on the table. 'This is simple work, but it is lovely to not need something quite so challenging for you, Jack Frost.'

He walked out from behind the table, carrying the pale green scarf which glimmered with silvery text, far less than the cluttered, tiny scrawl that Jack's scarf for Pitch had needed. Makara smoothed it over his wrist, the paint already dry.

'You will need to lift your sweatshirt again.'

Makara stood patiently in front of him. Jack looked at Pitch in alarm.

*My scars. I don't- I'm not ready.*

He swallowed and Pitch nodded in acknowledgement. Makara wasn't the only one who could discern truths without Jack speaking.

'I will turn away,' Pitch said quietly, and Jack felt a wave of disappointment as Pitch turned his back. It didn't feel right that Makara could see the scars, but Pitch couldn't.

He just wasn't ready yet.

He lifted his sweatshirt and Makara knelt at his feet, looping the gentle silk around his torso. Feeling the shape and weight of another scarf around his ribs was horrifying. He made a sound of distress, and Makara paused and looked up at him, dark eyes sober, sympathetic.

'You may remove it as *soon* as I've placed it,' he said. 'It only needs to be tied by my hands for the

magic to activate. Otherwise, you may do what you wish with it.'

But Jack's fear remained as Makara reached behind him and tied the knot. And as soon as Makara stood gracefully and stepped back, Jack twisted his hands behind himself, fumbling for the place where the scarf was attached. His breathing came faster. He removed it quickly, relieved to unwind it from his skin, wincing a little as the backs of his fingers brushed scar tissue that was smooth in places, whorled and knotted in others.

He folded the scarf carefully, looked an apology at Makara.

'How about the next time I visit, it's just because I want to visit, and not because of a scarf. Yeah?'

'I would very much like that, friend,' Makara said, troubled expression smoothing to a smile. 'Perhaps when the worst of your dark times are over.'

Pitch had turned back. He looked truly bewildered, eyes moving from Jack's face, up to the twenty foot creature he was seeing. Makara cleared his throat delicately.

'Your heart is becoming more true,' he said. 'It's pleasing. You are both very fortunate to have one another, as you do.'

Jack and Pitch's eyes met, gold on blue. Jack could read the discomfort in every line of Pitch's body. He wanted to stay, he wanted to talk with Makara about his life, about his garden, about what it was like being him, but...there was a time and a place for that, and it wasn't now.

'Soon, huh?' Jack said, and Makara nodded at him.

'Farewell, friend,' he said, as Pitch strode up to Jack. Pitch stared an unreadable look up at the twenty foot monster that Jack couldn't see, but Jack only waved at Makara, clutching the scarf in his hand. He stepped into Pitch's arms and tensed, but was able to ignore the small pulse of fear, and it was gone by the time Pitch's arms tightened around him. The last glimpse he had of Makara as they disappeared into the shadows, was of Makara lifting his hand in a lazy, graceful wave.

\*

Later, Pitch drilled with his axe in the training arena. Golden light spilled from his axe, pulsing through it in waves, flaring out from sharp axe blades. Jack watched him, relieved to see the golden light, the scarf from Makara safely tucked away in his room.

Sometimes, after Pitch finished a drill, he would stop, press a hand to his face, shoulders bowing. Jack wondered what Pitch thought of to summon the golden light but he suspected he knew. Seraphina felt closer to the surface than ever. They didn't talk about her, but she was there. Her memory drifted around them like smoke.

Jack walked forwards and Pitch looked up, smiled weakly, leaned his axe on the ground.

'Tomorrow, Kostroma,' he said, simply. 'The shadows aren't here, so I wonder if they were directed to stay at the locations themselves. Perhaps they are self-directing.'

'Kostroma,' Jack said pensively. He saw two images in his mind's eye. The Kostroma he'd associated with trust and safety. The Kostroma that had been destroyed.

'I have to admit, I'm not sure how I feel about you and Makara as friends,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head, smiled ruefully. He turned and floated a short distance away, making small Christmas tree sculptures out of hard, long-lasting ice. Maybe North would see them later. He still

hadn't caught up with North properly, but when they'd seen each other from a distance when Jack had returned from Makara's home, North had lifted a hand and waved cheerfully, and didn't seem overly concerned or cloyingly sympathetic, and Jack realised he was maybe being unfair on the man.

'Well, no one knew what to think when I started hanging out with you,' Jack said, 'So maybe I just have strange taste in friends.'

'Jack, I didn't know what to think when you started 'hanging out' with me,' Pitch said, and Jack could hear the amusement in his voice.

'Me either,' Jack said, creating a metre tall Christmas tree and decorating it with small, patterned Easter eggs. He finished that one off with a dusting of snow, and smiled at it.

'And how are you since yesterday?' Pitch said, his voice closer, approaching from behind.

Jack shrugged. They had gotten back to the Workshop, and Jack had felt so trapped to be there again. A loud, noisy, bright, flashing toy car had whizzed by them in the air and Jack had felt a wave of sadness choking him up. Pitch had seen immediately that Jack was going to cry again and ushered him into his own room, and once there, Pitch had drawn Jack down onto his bed and lain down beside him, faced him, a steadying hand on his shoulder. Jack had cried silently then, and Pitch had only said at the end, once some time had passed:

'I know, I hate the Workshop too.'

Jack had laughed. It was hard to hang onto his embarrassment about emotional outbursts around Pitch. He'd experienced a moment of shame, of humiliation, but it trickled through his fingers like sand and he was left only feeling tired and flat. With the wall of ice around his heart cracked open, he could feel the fluttering of fun, the hardness of his resolve, and he could sense the weight of his sadness. It didn't go away, he wondered if it ever would.

'Tired, I guess,' Jack said, starting on another Christmas tree. 'Just kind of- I think the word is world-weary? It's always great when spirits refer to me as being a boy, or really young, because I don't think I've *really* felt young for hundreds of years. Ageless sometimes, sure, and exuberant around the kids, absolutely, but *young*?'

'Beneath the surface, you were never that young at heart,' Pitch said, and Jack nodded, glad that Pitch recognised it. After all, his centre had been fun, but it hadn't been youth. The other Guardians had lived more of their lives before they had become Guardians; but Jack...Jack had seen death, experienced it in a way that none of the others had.

It left him outside of time. He was an anomaly. Almost-fae, according to Gwyn. Not quite a Guardian, no matter what the other Guardians thought.

'The others don't really get it,' Jack said. 'But then, they weren't dead and frozen at the bottom of a lake.'

'It *is* a hard life, being a zombie,' Pitch said, a touch of melodrama making his voice as musical as it had been back in the old days.

Jack turned to him, indignant laughter bubbling up in his throat, and was shocked to see Pitch right behind him.

His laughter died away immediately, fear wound up quickly. He saw – as though he were watching the scene from a corner – August standing behind him and raising bloodied fingers to Jack's mouth.



Jack cried out, Pitch stumbled backwards, and when there was a good six feet of space between them again, Jack stared at Pitch in dismay.

‘I didn’t realise that you were right there,’ Jack said, and he was grateful that Pitch didn’t seem exasperated or impatient. Only sad and shocked.

‘We’re still learning what you don’t like,’ Pitch said, ‘and I have had far too many years of sneaking up on people to know when I’m doing it absently.’

‘Well, that woke me up,’ Jack said, exhaling shakily and placing a hand over his chest.

‘Nothing like a shot of fear when you least expect it,’ Pitch murmured.

The laughter that had bubbled up in Jack’s throat came back again. It was bittersweet. Regardless of how difficult things were for Jack, there was something about being with Pitch that just made them easier overall. He’d rather deal with his fears with Pitch alongside him, than without, and he was glad to know that about himself again.

\*

Baby Tooth whizzed past Jack as he floated up some stairs onto one of the Workshop landings. He held his hands up and cradled her as she looped back to him, twittering in excitement. He smiled. She’d been a bright point during a very dark time, and even now she made his heart feel warmer.

‘The experiences she’s had have changed her,’ Toothiana said, flying up from behind the landing’s balcony and hovering in front of Jack. There was a Christmas wreath made of holly decorating her left wrist. ‘I always have a helpful team with me, most of the time, but she’s been a constant companion ever since you saved her.’

Jack pointed to the wreath, and Toothiana laughed.

‘I think one of the yeti might have a crush.’

Jack laughed.

‘He probably saw how amazing you were with a cannon. Seriously, I had no idea that you could do that!’

‘I’m just sorry I didn’t knock him out!’ Toothiana said, eyes lighting with a predatory gleam.

‘Yeah, I think everyone’s sorry about that. How have you been, anyway? What’s it like working from North’s?’

‘Oh! Well! Great to catch up with everyone, but *cold!* Did you know...’

Toothiana started talking about teeth, and Jack drifted off mentally, because try as he might, he could never be as fascinated by bicuspid and molars as she was. He followed the conversation a few sentences, and then found his mind drifting.

Toothiana laughed gently.

‘North makes that exact same expression when he’s zoning out! Teeth are *special*, Jack, and you know that!’

‘Well, they saved me once,’ Jack smiled, and Toothiana’s head crest flared in acknowledgement.

‘The memories did, and I’m so glad we had them for you, I only wish I’d known sooner that you...didn’t know. I- Well, I think about how that must have been for you. Not knowing. For so long.’

Jack opened his mouth to say ‘no harm done,’ to say that he was okay, that it didn’t matter, and then he tilted his head, wondered if he should. He’d protected all of them by lying to them about how hard it had been. He wasn’t sure he wanted to do that anymore. He closed his mouth again, and Toothiana nodded in understanding.

They talked a little longer, about teeth, about Toothiana’s unexpected delight in Pitch extending some trust to her. They talked about how Toothiana’s fascination with Gwyn had waned as soon as she’d gotten to know him, and Jack learned that Toothiana knew her way around vintage and contemporary cannons, and once – for three years – dreamed of being a fusilier.

They parted when Toothiana spotted the yeti who was infatuated with her, approaching with a wreath constructed from tinsel. Jack noted that it matched the colour of her feathers, and he had to give the yeti props for effort.

‘Oh dear,’ Toothiana murmured. ‘I think I need to nip this in the bud. See you soon, Jack!’

She flew off, and Baby Tooth followed, nuzzling Jack’s hair quickly before flitting away.

Jack watched as Toothiana escorted Jeremy the yeti into a side room. He shook his head and then flew up to Pitch’s room. He knocked, but he didn’t hear an answer. Pitch wasn’t there. He closed the door behind him, muffling the Workshop noises.

He leaned against the door for a minute, then flew onto Pitch’s bed. He rested his staff against the wall and curled up. Pitch would be back soon enough.

Dread curled through him as he looked for sleep. He felt, strangely, the way he’d felt before the battle at the gymnasium. Desperate for one last time with Pitch, desperate to make sure they shared something together before...before- Jack didn’t even know what he’d been dreading at the time, only that he felt like something awful was going to happen.

Something awful *had* happened.

He had never been good at convincing himself that everything was going to be okay, not when it came to relationships and friendships with others. He could help other people in a crisis, convince them everything was going to be fine, but...

The Nightmare King could be back again before they even managed to defeat August.

Jack groaned and wrapped his hand around his head. His mind wouldn’t *stop*. If he could just get out into the forests and the open air, he’d have something to *do* again. He felt like a hamster stuck on an exercise wheel, and he just wanted to get off for a while.

Sleep was sometimes the only option.

\*

The nightmare sank its claws deeply. Jack was in the gymnasium, watching a tornado of living shadows whirl around Pitch. They pressed past his golden sphere of light and took him over. It was happening, he was losing him *again*. August stood idly by, the Nain Rouge watched with avid hunger, having no idea that the Nightmare King would never be content until he could consume the shadows she held as well.

Pitch turned towards him and Jack started screaming, over and over, not wanting it to be true. But his voice wouldn't spill forth, and Pitch couldn't hear him. And instead of crying out for Jack to save him, Pitch turned his head away at the last minute, despair rolling over his features. He didn't *believe* in Jack.

Jack woke with a cry, calling Pitch's name, reaching out blindly and finding warmth in front of him, arms hovering over him. His voice was choked up, thick with distress. He was desperate for everything to be okay. He needed Pitch to believe in him, he needed, he-

'Jack,' Pitch said, concerned. 'Jack, you-'

'Please,' Jack said, confused and knotted up, remembering how Pitch had denied him this before the gymnasium. Pitch denied him on the basis that they weren't about to lose each other.

Pitch had been *wrong*.

'Please,' Jack whimpered, and dug his fingers into Pitch's robe. 'Please.'

'I don't know what you-'

Jack dragged him forwards, pushed himself up with the grip on Pitch's robes and pressed his lips to Pitch's in a clumsy kiss. He tasted warmth and cinnamon and something bitter. His own lips shook against Pitch's. He was warm against his skin, and he pulled himself up Pitch's robes until he hung on at the collar.

Pitch's hands came to rest tentatively on Jack's shoulders. He pushed gently. Jack withdrew, but wouldn't let go, *couldn't*.

'Pitch,' Jack said, remembering only that Pitch had denied him all that time ago. Pitch didn't believe in him. But that had been the dream, hadn't it? There were dark masses, jagged edges in his mind. He knew he was playing with something dangerous, not because of Pitch, but because of his own memories, the minefield that was his own mind. But he just needed to know that Pitch was still there, still his, wouldn't leave him again.

'I don't want to go back to Kostroma tomorrow,' Jack said, voice shaking. 'What if you *go*? What if it happens again? I can't...I can't do that again. I can't.'

'Jack, it's-'

'If you tell me it's going to be okay, I will turn you into an icicle, and push you down the stairs.'

'Jack, I-'

'I want-'

Jack pressed his lips back to Pitch's and moaned softly. He wanted *this*.

Pitch didn't respond for several long seconds. Jack's heart raced, his pulse pounded in his throat. And then one of Pitch's hands came up and wrapped firmly around his back, heedless of the way Jack tensed in involuntary apprehension. He opened his mouth against Jack's, licked his way inside, and Jack had a dizzying moment where it wasn't Pitch's tongue in his mouth but something else – *someone else*.

Pitch made a muffled sound of frustration, then drew back just enough to press his teeth into Jack's bottom lip. Jack moaned at the slight ache of it, his eyes flew open to see golden irises staring at

him.

Jack pushed hungrily forwards, wanting more, but Pitch pushed back, leaning over him and holding him upright with the hand that splayed on his back. Pitch slid his tongue into Jack's mouth again, heat warming his tongue, tracing the back of his front teeth, slowly licking a wet path back to the outside of Jack's mouth where he lingered, fingers flexing into his skin.

'We can,' Jack said. 'You can. Let's- I mean, I want to-'

Pitch groaned and slanted his lips over Jack's. The taste of cinnamon was soon gone, replaced by what was quintessentially Pitch; heat, bitterness, a faint astringent flavour. Pitch tasted like his body's chemistry had been altered by his life experiences, and Jack sucked hard on Pitch's tongue.

Pitch dragged his hand down the back of Jack's sweatshirt, and Jack felt the grip slide over one of the more sensitive areas of scar tissue. He stiffened, uncomfortable, and Pitch stilled.

'Jack,' Pitch whispered, drawing back and resting his cheek against Jack's. 'How many scars do you have?'

'Enough,' Jack said. 'A few. Don't stop, you don't have to stop.'

Pitch said nothing, and then rubbed his cheek alongside Jack's, as though he wanted to stop but couldn't make himself disengage. Jack's hair stuck to his, Jack felt his cheek begin to warm. He slid one of his hands underneath the fold of Pitch's robe, traced the thinner material of his undershirt, felt the furnace that was his skin.

'You don't have to stop,' Jack said, shivering and nervous and hungry for more.

'I want to see them,' Pitch said, and Jack grit his teeth together.

'I'm not ready,' Jack said. 'I can't. I don't want you to see them.'

'Because it will make it real?' Pitch said. 'Because it will be something we must share between us? Because I will see what you will not talk to me about?'

Jack leaned sideways out of Pitch's grip, but Pitch held onto him, followed the movement of Jack's face with his own, captured the corner of his neck with his mouth. Jack choked on a moan.

'Jack,' Pitch whispered. He licked his way across to the pale scar at Jack's neck, and closed his mouth around it. Jack's voice cracked on his cry, his body grew lax. Once, Pitch had done this, and he'd hated it. *Now...*

Pitch licked the edges of the scar and then scraped his teeth across it, creating a mix of sensations that crossed from the sharp, alert thrill from his unscarred skin, to the dull tingle that pulsed at the centre of his scar. His hand under Pitch's robe curved around his ribs and clutched onto his back, his other hand held onto Pitch's collar. He felt like he was falling. He realised at some point he'd gotten hard, and he shifted uncomfortably, pressed up without thinking.

It had been so *long*.

'Please,' Jack said. '*Please.*'

'You're still scared, Jack,' Pitch said. 'More than usual, I-'

'You want me to share my scars with you,' Jack gasped, 'but I've got scars everywhere, Pitch, not

just on my body. I don't want to wait forever, I don't want- I mean I don't even know if I *can* do this, I just, you could be gone again tomorrow, and if I don't *try*- And I have to try, I-'

He shuddered into silence as Pitch licked a warm stripe up his neck, across his jawline, and then back to his lips again.

Jack was sure Pitch was going to stop, and his eyes widened in surprise when Pitch placed a warm hand over his heart and pushed him down onto the bed, climbing over him, settling between his legs and looking down, eyes glowing golden in the darkness of the room. Jack couldn't be sure, but since he'd learned how to make the golden light again, his eyes seemed brighter; mellifluous like the light itself.

Pitch kissed him, and Jack's eyes fluttered closed. He burrowed his hands in Pitch's coarse hair, and Pitch absently feathered his fingers through Jack's.

He jolted, breath stilling in his lungs.

'Not that, not-'

'Of course,' Pitch said quickly. He'd already moved his hand away, and Jack stuttered through a shaky breath and dragged Pitch's mouth down to his. As they kissed, Jack couldn't quite get the uneasiness to go away, and he made a small sound of disappointment.

'It's still there,' Jack said. 'I just want it to *go away*.'

'It will,' Pitch said. They looked at each other, their breathing audible. Pitch was a heavy, long weight between his legs, and Jack raised and bent one of his legs, leaning it into Pitch's body, unsure what he wanted, not ready to let Pitch go.

'Do you want to keep going?' Pitch said, and his palm came up and cupped Jack's face, his thumb smoothing over his cheekbone.

'I thought you wouldn't want to,' Jack said, 'because of...the fear.'

'It is difficult,' Pitch admitted quietly, 'but it is obvious that you want this.'

Pitch lowered his hips slowly, placing increasing pressure over Jack's cock through his pants. Jack felt a lance of pleasure, his mouth opened on a silent cry. He wanted his pants open, he wanted Pitch against him. He wasn't relaxed, he was afraid of things going wrong, of what was inside his own mind. Jack scrambled to think of something else.

'And you?' Jack said, and Pitch reached up and took one of Jack's hands in his own. Pitch hesitated, as though thinking something through, and then drew Jack's hand down his body. Jack's breathing became shallow as Pitch pressed Jack's hand against the thin pants he wore, the shape of his hard cock beneath it. Jack wasn't sure what to do, and then his fingers curled around the length of Pitch, tentatively.

Pitch exhaled a rush of air.

'What do you want, Jack?' Pitch said, and he let go of Jack's hand where it rested against him, and smoothed his palm over Jack's hipbone. His fingers started to creep under Jack's sweatshirt, touching cold skin, and Jack winced.

'No,' Jack said, gritting his teeth. 'Not the scars. I'm not...I'm not making this easy, am I?'

‘No,’ Pitch said on a small breath of laughter, ‘but no one said it had to be easy every time. So tell me, what do you want?’

Pitch’s hips rolled into Jack’s again, trapping Jack’s hand between them both, and Jack shuddered. He wanted Pitch against him. He wanted to feel warmed through, and he wanted something to add to the pile of memories in his head – something new and recent he could pull on when the darkness threatened to drown him.

‘*More,*’ Jack said, and Pitch chuckled.

‘You can’t be naked, I don’t think we should fuck, but we *can* manage more. Do you trust me?’

‘I trust you,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t trust my own head, the roadblocks it keeps throwing up.’

‘As long as you let me know when I misstep, it will be more than fine,’ Pitch said. ‘Just let me *touch* you.’

Pitch’s fingers made short work of the catch at Jack’s pants, and then Jack’s back arched when Pitch slid fingers around him, a brand of heat that was almost painful. His mouth worked around his next breath as Pitch drew him out of his pants and stroked the tip of his thumb over the head of Jack’s cock.

Jack’s voice broke as Pitch started to work him slowly, his legs bent restlessly, his hand shifted against Pitch’s hardness. He lacked coordination, dazed by heat and lust, caught up in thin threads of worry that framed him like spider’s web.

Pitch swallowed down Jack’s next cry, kissing him with a slow, hypnotic confidence that made Jack’s mind begin to fill with luscious, heat-warmed darkness. He removed his hand from Jack’s cock and reached out blindly to the chest of drawers by his bed, opening it without removing his mouth from Jack’s, pressing the fabric of his robe down onto Jack’s cock and humming in amusement when Jack groaned from the rasp of it.

‘How do you have lube?’ Jack managed, as Pitch popped the lid open and poured some on his fingers. Jack had no idea what Pitch had planned.

‘I can teleport through shadows to any place in the world, Jack, lubricant is not a difficult thing for me to acquire.’

‘Yeah, but...I mean, you got it with...us in mind, right?’

Pitch dropped the small tube onto the bed and returned slick, warmed fingers to Jack’s cock, and Jack’s mouth dropped open. Pitch chose that moment to lick the corner of it, then bit again at his bottom lip.

‘Jack, I loathe this Workshop as much as you do, and let’s just say I do not have the same constraints of trauma interrupting my imagination.’

Jack’s eyes widened.

‘Just how much do you think about us...doing things?’

Pitch laughed behind a closed mouth, and his fingers tightened around Jack’s cock briefly, before he drew his hands away and pulled his own pants down. Pitch kissed Jack again, was drawing himself out of his own pants, and then Jack made a small squeak when he felt the length of Pitch press against himself, and Pitch’s fingers wrap around the both of them, slicking them both up.

*Oh god.*

Pitch groaned, and Jack's hips thrust up immediately, small sounds falling out of his breath on every exhale. The friction was intense, and it felt startlingly good. He'd never done anything like this before in his life, and he was starting to wonder what else Pitch knew about, that Jack had never experienced.

Pitch rolled his hips into Jack with fluid, undulating movements, and his four fingers kept them anchored together, while his thumb brushed over the heads of both their cocks. Jack fisted his hands into the blankets, and then reached up and wrapped his arms around Pitch's back, hips rolling in time to Pitch's rhythm. His body was a wash of sharp, vibrant pleasure. He realised he wasn't going to last.

'Pitch,' Jack whimpered, 'I'm-'

'Yes,' Pitch hissed, and his hand tightened. He thrust harder, and Jack trembled, awash in sensations that kept building even when he was sure they couldn't anymore. A moment of fear, that it would be too much, too intense, but even that was flooded away by the rise of want inside of him. His lower body was burning, his heart felt like it was going to pound right out of his chest.

'Pitch,' Jack cried out, and a tight, stretched band in his lower body pulled taut and then snapped with a painful force. Jack's spine arched as he came, Pitch's hand moving faster around him, driving towards his own release. And the increase in intensity made Jack wail into his palm, muffling the sound so that it vibrated, high and wrecked, against his own skin. Pitch dragged his release out, moving against his cock with his own, thumb catching and smearing his come back over the head of him.

Pitch's hips stuttered against his and then jerked hard, drawing a ruined groan from Jack. Pitch's hand curled over the both of them, catching his own release as he came. He fisted his hand into the pillow by Jack's head where he was bracing himself. He kissed Jack with a bruising, overtaking force, tongue driving deep. Hot, long breaths shivered out of him. Fluid dripped from Pitch's hand back over them both, a mix of hot and cold. And then Pitch's grip abruptly loosened and he slumped, licking lazily, sensuously at the inside of Jack's mouth, before pulling back and taking several deep breaths.

Jack's lips were swollen, his heart was still racing inside of his chest. He still felt like it wasn't enough, even though he was spent, even though his body ached from the force of his release.

He was still afraid. And as he realised they were both still fully clothed, a sadness curled through him. He wanted to offer Pitch more, but he didn't know how. And Pitch's hand flexed by his head, like his fingers wanted to slide through his hair, and then his hand clenched into a fist again.

Pitch had been holding them both in the loose circle of his hand, and he slid his fingers sensually up Jack's oversensitive shaft as he let go, drawing a whimper from him. He reached across them again, and came back with tissues, and Jack hissed when Pitch wiped him clean. Pitch hummed in approval, and Jack remembered that Pitch liked that, when Jack was too sensitive, when everything bordered on some precipice of pleasure and pain.

Pitch tossed the tissues into the wastepaper basket by the chest of drawers, missed, and then grunted tiredly. He lowered his head to Jack's open palm where it rested on the bed, and kissed the centre of it tenderly. Jack shivered. It felt nice. It was something August hadn't ruined.

When Pitch kissed the inside of his wrist, Jack dragged his other hand back through Pitch's hair again.

Eventually, Pitch shifted from between Jack's legs and lowered himself to lay alongside Jack. He wrapped one of his legs around Jack's possessively, enough that Jack turned into him, wished the worst fear would stay away forever. He hated the barrier of his clothing, of Pitch's clothing, it had felt...wrong that they were both so fully clothed. But it was the only way.

Jack pressed closer, and pretended he didn't tense when Pitch's hand dug into his back in response, directly over the scar where his sword had rested. The tension wound away after a couple of minutes, and Pitch rubbed at his back as though he approved.

Jack realised that he might go and speak to Sandy about what could be done about desensitising himself to having hands in his hair, having people approach him from behind. He wanted to do something about the tension. He didn't want to talk to anyone about it, not *anyone*, but...the cost of keeping it to himself was so very high.

'The first time I saw you again, when you were conscious and awake, I just...well okay not the *first* time, because oops, that axe didn't go down well. But the first time I saw you, properly, and...I just wanted you to know. I wanted you to read my fears so I wouldn't have to say anything. I knew we needed Makara's scarf, I *knew* that, but I hoped so much that you would just look at me and the scarf wouldn't work and you would feel it or see the colours of it and understand.'

Pitch had shifted back in surprise, staring at Jack.

'I didn't know that,' Pitch murmured. Jack sighed.

'I mean, I didn't want you to know as well. I was...confused. But I just wished you would...I felt like I was trapped.'

'Gwyn should never have made you do that,' Pitch said, referring to the scarf, and Jack laughed softly.

'It was my idea. I was the one who went to the Nain Rouge on my own – Gwyn was furious with me – and I was the one who found out about Mak-'

'You did *what?*' Pitch exclaimed, his voice rising on an edge.

Jack realised that there were still significant gaps in Pitch's knowledge. He hadn't told him about the visit to the Nain Rouge, and evidently Gwyn hadn't either.

'Well, it was-'

'*Jack*, of all the stupid, destructive, foolish-'

'I was *dying*, okay?' Jack said, pushing at Pitch with the fist he had wrapped up in his robe. Frustration circled through his spent body and he shook his head, not knowing if he could make him understand. 'It worked, and I was dying. I was good as dead. As far as I was concerned, I was a dead man walking. Gwyn and I both knew it. We knew there wasn't any hope. We were racing against the time I had left, in order to bring you back. We didn't have *time* to look for a cure or a solution. Okay? There were priorities and I wasn't one of them. It was like I was already dead, especially after what happened with...you know. What was the Nain Rouge after that?'

Pitch shifted quickly and drew Jack close, crushing him to his chest, tucking his head into Jack's hair. Jack tensed, made a small, thin sound of discomfort, but Pitch didn't let him go. He held on, and Jack realised that Pitch was shaking.

'...Pitch?'



'It terrifies me,' Pitch said, drawing back, lifting his head out of Jack's hair. Jack felt his body go lax in relief, tried to ignore the phantom fingers he felt carding through his hair. 'I want you here, with me. That you could have been...that you could have died. I have spent all my life understanding that death is a reality of war, but I want you outside of that, and *separate* from it.'

'I'm not though,' Jack whispered.

'No,' Pitch sounded sad, his voice heavy.

'I don't want tomorrow to be like last time. The gymnasium. The...everything.'

'It can't be,' Pitch said quietly, and though he sounded worried, he sounded sure. 'It can't be like last time. The circumstances are different. And the bulk of the shadows have been destroyed. Even if the worst were to happen and I were possessed again...'

Pitch made a small sound in response to Jack's whimper of denial.

'Even *then*, Gwyn can make the light. And I might very well survive a possession if less shadows were involved. And you have saved me before. I believe in you Jack. I know you will save me again, if it came to that.'

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'I Want More,' Jack approaches Sandy and North about his issues with comfort. Jack and Pitch go back to a ruined Kostroma to confront the living shadows.

# I Want More

## Chapter Notes

Hi folks. I am running out of ways to say thank you, and I worry that it doesn't come across as heartfelt. But it is heartfelt, and I am just thankful for everything, because this fic wouldn't exist, or be updated nearly as quickly, if it wasn't for you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was still dark as Jack flew to the top of the Workshop. Sandy was likely asleep, but Jack didn't want to take up too much of his time, and if he didn't do it now, he was going to keep putting it off. Besides, knowing what he and Pitch were going to do later in the day – *Kostroma* – this seemed the lesser of two evils.

When he crested Sandy's puffy, temporary home of golden cumulus, he was surprised to see that Sandy was awake, and North was sitting beside him. Mora lay down nearby, her legs folded neatly beneath her. She whickered in happiness when she saw Jack, swinging her head towards him, mane swirling and mingling with errant strands of golden dreamsand.

'Jack!' North exclaimed, and Jack raised his eyebrows, smiled nervously.

'I don't want to interrupt you guys, so I'll just come back later. You-'

'You are being ridiculous!' North said, waving him over with a broad hand and almost upsetting his goblet of what smelled like mead. Sandy nodded vigorously in agreement, flashing snowflakes and smiley faces above his head. Jack placed his hand on the cumulus cloud, feeling shifting sand warm beneath his fingers, and then decided to at least sit with them.

'I am taking break,' North said conspiratorially. Jack was surprised to hear that he was taking a break at all. The days crept towards Christmas, and North and his insomnia meant that he barely scraped more than two hours of sleep a night. He didn't take breaks. He worked on his own toy ideas, he advised the yeti, he took special care of the reindeer, he made sure the Workshop was in working order.

Jack saw – firsthand – how the Workshop had changed from an atmosphere that was almost relaxed in retrospect, to a colourful, perpetual machine of wonder; magic bursting from every object. Overnight, delicate fairylights that looked like snowflakes had appeared in Jack's room, seeming to have grown out of the very walls. That very morning, a twine of fluffy golden tinsel had snaked its way around the legs of the armchair in Pitch's room. It had appeared from the very energy of the Workshop itself, since neither of them had opened a window or door to let it in.

'Hey, Sandy,' Jack said, 'can I talk to you about something?'

Sandy nodded, beaming, and North pushed himself upright.

'I am sensing this is private matter,' he said, and Jack frowned. He'd been keeping North out of the loop for a very long time. It was true that Jack didn't like to cause North upset, but North had taken everything in his stride so far. Wasn't North the one who already – mostly – figured out what the nature of his time with the Each Uisge was like? Jack winced.

‘No...stay,’ Jack said. ‘You can...hear this too.’

‘Jack, are you sure?’ North said, and Jack nodded, felt his chest tighten. He didn’t want to talk to one person about it, let alone two, but if he could find the strength to mention some of those events to Sandy, then perhaps he could do the same for North.

Jack settled next to Mora, placing his back against her, folding his legs. She lay her head alongside his thigh and butted him lazily with her head until he started scratching the bridge of her nose. He smoothed his fingers over the small yellow star at her forehead, and then tousled her mane.

‘Pitch said I should talk to you about something,’ Jack said, staring down at the ground. ‘I don’t know how to talk about it though.’

North sighed. Jack looked up at him, and North was in the middle of shrugging, looking down at the ground himself.

‘If you are muddling through it, we will muddle through it with you,’ North said, and Sandy nodded again, his smile having dissipated to something gentle and small. There was a concerned cast to his eyes, he sat on a beanbag made of sand.

‘It’s- I keep having these nightmares,’ Jack said. Sandy scowled at him. ‘I know, Sandy. I know I was meant to come to you about my sleep, but I honestly just keep forgetting and when I don’t forget, I just- I feel like you’re kind of busy enough?’

Jack didn’t look up, he knew that Sandy would be shaking his head in disagreement, but he didn’t think he could see that. He needed to find a way to say what he needed to say.

‘I keep having these nightmares,’ Jack said again. ‘About...a thing that happened, with, you know, with the Each Uisge. I guess I’m having flashbacks too, during the day? I mean, North saw that.’

Jack winced. He’d just collapsed in front of everyone, of course North had seen it.

‘Pitch said that you could help me maybe, with the dreamsand. With good dreams?’

Jack realised he was shaking, and laughed at himself. He pressed himself back into Mora’s sturdy form, buried his hand in her warm mane. She swung her head, rested it on his thigh, a heavy weight on his legs. It was good, it kept him focused.

‘There were a few things that happened, but it’s this particular *thing* that’s making things hard for me to connect sometimes with Pitch, and with...others. When I was beneath the water, he changed his...strategy, and he,’ Jack took a deep breath, he hoped they would understand, because playing the words through his mind, it sounded so insignificant. ‘He compelled me to say the things that Pitch did, that I found the most...comforting. And then he did them. He...pretended to comfort me.’

‘*What?*’ North exploded, and Jack’s head snapped up, eyes wide. North looked like he had gone to stand, hands clenched into fists, but he was already forcing himself to sit again, already placing his hands – very deliberately – back on his legs.

Sandy watched quietly, all traces of a smile gone from his face, an open expression in his eyes. Jack remembered what Pitch had said about Sandy being no wilting flower. He didn’t know if that helped. It probably meant that Sandy had seen a lot worse, maybe it meant that Sandy wouldn’t see what the problem was.

‘It’s little things,’ Jack said, automatically. ‘But Pitch can’t put his hands in my hair anymore. And it’s hard to...hug people. And I wasn’t used to doing that anyway. Some things are okay! Like, it’s

not everything. Pitch can still touch my face and that didn't make me react at all. But Pitch touching my hair was kind of like our thing, and I want it back, and Pitch said maybe you could help with dreams or something. I don't know. If I'm asking too much just tell me. I know how busy you are.'

There was a long silence. Jack risked looking up when nothing happened. North looked at the ground, thoughtful, but he didn't have that horrible, affixed sympathy that Jack expected. Sandy looked directly at Jack, eyes narrow, then nodded slowly. He flashed the image of a bed, the image of a snowflake, and the image of an equilateral cross; a universal sign of first aid. Just in case Jack didn't understand, he flashed a caduceus, snakes twining up a staff framed with wings.

'What do I do though? I don't sleep at regular times, and I don't want to be coming up here every time I fall asleep. I sort of sleep randomly, and I'm not always in a great space when I do it. I don't even know if I *could* come up here.'

Sandy placed his palms flat together in front of himself, and a look of fierce concentration came over his face. When he drew his palms apart, a small, sturdy snowflake appeared. It spun in the air, then dropped with a thud to the ground. North picked it up and handed it to Jack.

Jack turned the snowflake thoughtfully in his fingers. The sand felt hard, compacted. It felt like Mora; was solid, not ephemeral. He tightened his fingers around it and no grains fell off.

Sandy was flashing a myriad of symbols to North, who nodded and faced Jack. North offered a smile.

'He is saying that if you squeeze this as you fall asleep, Sandy will know that you are wanting the dreams, and he will send out his dreamsand. Even when he is sleeping, he will do this, since his second mind – his subconscious – stays awake while his conscious mind rests. Pitch is right, I am surprised though that he thought of this.'

'I'm not,' Jack said, laughing. He looked at Sandy. 'He said that you were kind of a pain in the Nightmare King's ass, because of the power of good dreams.'

Sandy beamed again, taking the comment as a giant compliment. He spread his hands and closed his eyes as if to say; *I'm great, it's true.*

'But it's okay? I'm not a kid anymore, and things are slowly getting better anyway. So, it's not as if-'

'Jack, we are your *friends*, we want to help,' North said, and Jack carefully avoided eye contact, looked at the giant sand manta ray that was coasting back towards them through the night sky, before melding seamlessly into cloud. 'Maybe, Sandy, you can be giving him some dreams to remind him that he has friends.'

'Hey,' Jack said, laughing. 'That's cheating.'

'No, it is not,' North said stubbornly, a mischievous glint in his blue eyes.

But Sandy nodded in agreement with Jack, and North drained his goblet, rolling his eyes.

'We are in my own Workshop, I think I get final say,' North said, but his moustache shifted as his face split into a smile. 'Ah, it is no matter, you are already offering us *so much more of yourself* than you were, Jack. I am just greedy! I like this spending time with you. Perhaps you could live in the Workshop forever!'

Jack laughed in dismay and shook his head.

‘Ah, no, how about...I need forests and snow and winter, North. Visiting is wonderful, staying is great, but I need...’

‘I am understanding this,’ North said. ‘And you are needing a home of your own, are you not?’

Jack realised that he hadn’t given a single thought to a home of his own for a long time. He wondered if Gwyn would still help him with that.

‘But to think!’ North said to Sandy, a twinkle in his eye. ‘To hear Jack talking like this. Why Jack, I am thinking I have never heard you tell me what you need before!’

Jack looked between the two of them, rubbing absently at Mora’s sandy muzzle as she lipped at his pants. They both looked happy to hear that Jack couldn’t stay in the Workshop, and it puzzled him. Still, the conversation had gone far better than he thought it would.

‘Sandy, I am thinking of a *giant* Christmas tree!’ North spread his arms wide, and Sandy responded before he’d finished talking.

He shifted his hands, clapped them in a business-like manner and then sent a huge, golden Christmas tree – sparkling with facets of tiny grains of sand – into being. It hovered nearby, at least forty feet tall and spinning slowly. Instead of a star or an angel at the top, however, Sandy had placed North and his reindeer flying through the night sky above it. North laughed in delight.

Sandy beamed in response, and then flashed a question mark over his head.

*Next?*

‘Ah,’ North placed a single finger to his head, in thought. ‘Give me Rudolph, in one of his *moods*.’

The Christmas tree dissolved and Rudolph, the fierce, temperamental reindeer at the head of North’s fleet sprang into being. He had his antlers down, and he blew puffs of golden smoke out of flared nostrils. His eyes gleamed white-gold, and when he pawed the ground, tiny bits of sand sparked from his hooves.

‘How often do you do this?’ Jack said, realising that this was an old game between the two of them. He wished he’d known this about them such a long time ago. He wanted to be part of things like this. He wanted-

‘We do it when there are times of stress, or when one of us has had a little too much to drink. Sandy understands wonder, and I understand dreams, and these things – in part – are why I understand him so well. No one taught me his language, for I *know* the symbolic power of toys and charms and rituals.’

Sandy nodded in agreement, hair flipping back and forth. And then he dissolved the charging Rudolph made of sand, and pointed to Jack.

‘Jack, yes! What would you like Sandy to make?’

Jack flushed cold with pleasure to be asked, then his mind went blank. But Sandy had that eager look on his face, and North looked on his way to tipsy.

Jack looked up into the night sky and knew what he wanted to see.

‘The Northern Lights!’ Jack said, looking up. ‘But with your sand!’

‘Ah,’ North said in appreciation, and Jack shared a smile with him. His nose and cheeks were flushed pink, and his eyes sparkled.

And so it was that Jack saw the Northern Lights turn a brilliant, honeyed gold for the first time in his life, as Sandy outdid himself and filled the skies with giant, towering edifices of falling sand, creating the illusion of movement and light dancing through the sky. They all stretched out to watch in appreciation – even Sandy and Mora – and Jack couldn’t help the smile that played around his lips when North turned to Sandy and quietly said:

‘Of course, I was knowing he’d be good at this.’

\*

Pitch was polishing the axe blades when Jack returned. There was an agitated, fretful energy about the movements, and Jack watched him, perturbed. Pitch was not happy to be going back to Kostroma, and he couldn’t blame him. Those Nightmare Men fought dirty, even when they weren’t possessing someone else and using their body. Hearing Seraphina’s voice like that, knowing they could hear it again...

Jack waited, anxiously, and Pitch looked at him after a few minutes had passed, as though dragging his mind away from something unpleasant.

‘Nightmares aside, which are quite standard for the both of us these days, were there any unpleasant side effects from last night?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘It was- I don’t regret it.’

Pitch’s hands fumbled over the axe head, and his shoulders relaxed slightly. He offered him a small, pleased smile in response, and Jack returned it.

‘I talked to Sandy about...better dreams,’ Jack said, and removed the golden snowflake from his hoodie. ‘He gave me this. Can I keep it here?’

Pitch nodded, and Jack set it down on the chest of drawers. The sand retained its warmth, despite being close to Jack’s body.

‘It’s funny,’ Jack said. ‘I spent all this time wanting someone, and now that I have someone...we can’t just do all the things that I sort of want to be doing. That’s...’

‘I would very much like to tell you that we have time, that at the end of today I will be here, but I have come to realise that – for someone who hates platitudes – these assurances ring *false*, given what we go to do today.’

Pitch’s brow furrowed.

‘*Damn*,’ he said.

‘What?’ Jack said, confused.

‘Jack, you don’t even have to come with me. You are aware of that, aren’t you? This is something I should do on my own.’

‘Ha, yeah, no,’ Jack said, laughing in disbelief. ‘Firstly, my staff can help keep the shadows away,

so that will *help*. And secondly, do you *want* to do this on your own?’

Pitch looked at him for a long time, and then averted his eyes. Jack grimaced.

‘You’re worse than I am sometimes, seriously. How about you stop trying to do the right thing, and just do the thing you actually want to do. We’re a team. It didn’t even occur to me not to go with you! If this works, then I want to be there. If it doesn’t work, then I am going to be the one who fought to make sure that didn’t happen, and I’m going to know where you went, so I can *bring you back*. Uh. Yeah here’s hoping it doesn’t come to that though.’

Jack laughed at the thought of staying behind. The more he considered it, the more absurd it was.

‘What would I do? Sit here and eat candy canes while you faced off your darkest, most depressing enemy? I mean, *really*?’

Pitch opened his mouth as though he had an argument in response to that, and then saw the look on Jack’s face and closed it.

‘Then we should leave, and see what our day becomes,’ Pitch said quietly, and Jack’s heart felt like it had stopped beating in his chest.

They were leaving *now*?

He swallowed.

‘Okay, so...’

‘So, I was a war general once, and a polemarch. I have – though it was a long time ago now – slain many of these abominations with a single sword and my light. I am hoping that, rusty as I may be, that is what I’ll do again.’

Pitch stood, grasping the axe firmly and holding his hand out to Jack.

‘I’m a little scared, hey,’ Jack said, knowing that Pitch knew that.

Pitch looked at him with a sober, sad expression on his face.

‘Me too,’ he said.

\*

They landed within the boundary of the ward. Jack could feel it was still active. He shivered. It was a radiantly pretty day, blue skies hanging azure above them. He hoped that if the Nightmare Men were about, that would at least keep them trapped in the house.

And then Jack imagined them in the house, lurking *anywhere*, and his throat closed up with fear.

‘Oh crap,’ Jack said, and Pitch squeezed his hand and let go of it.

‘My light will find them,’ Pitch said. ‘If they are there.’

‘And if they’re not? Then what?’

‘Then...we resign ourselves to the fact that there will always be stray shadows lurking around this planet.’

Pitch struck off towards the house first this time, surprisingly bold given that Jack knew how sick with fear he must feel. He held his axe up and ready, and Jack followed, alert, his staff out.

They walked up the steps towards the broken door, wood creaking beneath their feet.

‘Daddy, *help me!*’

Pitch’s feet slowed to a heavy, shocked stop. The axe head *thunked* to the ground beside him.

‘I tried to prepare myself for this,’ he said, voice hoarse.

‘You can’t prepare yourself for this,’ Jack said, feeling sick.

Shadows loomed from the inside of the house. And within, the sound of dark, sinister laughter. A long, rolling chuckle.

‘*DADDY!*’

Pitch shuddered, his shoulders started to bow.

‘Just think,’ Jack said, desperate to make sure that Pitch didn’t return to that numb, blank state he’d fallen into last time. ‘Just think, if you kill them, you won’t have to hear them use her like this again. And they’ll be *gone*.’

‘Do you know,’ Pitch said, voice thin, ‘I think that actually helps.’

Jack thought Pitch would be slow and methodical. He thought Pitch would work room by room. He did not expect Pitch to charge into his own home, axe up and blazing, three Nightmare Men immediately falling before the light. And Jack flew in behind him, staff up, wishing he had eyes in the back of his head because the shadows could come at them from any direction, including the floor and the ceiling.

Pitch was fearless. Not only that, but Jack noticed that after he killed the first four Nightmare Men, he paused and quivered with tension, his eyes moving slowly around the room. He was listening for something, and Jack knew that he was – somehow – pinpointing the locations of the living shadows in the same way that he could read the fears of others.

He was proven right when Pitch strode into a room on the first floor and the shrieking sound of dying Nightmare Men came, Pitch walking back out quickly and running up the stairs, checking on Jack with a quick backwards glance before calling more golden light forth and using it as a blazing, bright star to light his way.

Jack followed him, hands iced and ready even though his ice would do nothing.

There, in the distance, the rippling sound of Seraphina’s voice cut off mid-shriek as Pitch buried his axe into a Nightmare Man, cutting him in half and turning him into wisps of neutralised shadow. Pitch roared a distressed, trapped sound, and exhaled, broken. Jack kept his distance as Pitch turned again, burying his axe into what looked like innocuous shadows resting against the wall. But as soon as the light touched them, they curled, shrivelled, shrieked.

Pitch surveyed the room again, and then looked up through the wooden panels of the ceiling, as though he could see straight through to living shadows waiting beyond.

‘Will you *always* be such cowards?!’ Pitch shouted, enraged.



The house trembled slightly. Something black and insidious oozed through a spiral of wood-grain in the ceiling and dripped slowly towards the floor. It flinched when Pitch summoned the golden light to his axe again. Jack was surprised that Pitch didn't cut it down straight away, but waited until it coalesced into a Nightmare Man, replete with hollow eyes, a maw of a mouth.

'You will *always* be so well suited for us,' the shadow said, sibilant, its voice a sinister, empty space that stole darkness from the room. 'We put our mark on you thousands of years ago. You will never be free of us.'

The voice rose and fell, distorted. It didn't quite come from the figure in the centre of the room, but instead a multitude of places. It was like listening to something that could only speak in echoes.

'You may have put your mark on me,' Pitch ground out, face fierce. 'But the light did too.'

He slammed his axe into the shadow, and it split, laughing as it disintegrated.

A deep howl rent the room, and shadows pushed in from all the corners, seeping through the ceiling. They lurched at Pitch with swift ferocity, attempting to push past the glowing axe and get a hold of him. Jack flew around the corners of the room, trying to keep them away, but there were too many.

One wrapped around Pitch's neck, and Jack hooked his staff into its dark form, passing through the nothingness of it, forcing it away. Pitch shifted his grip on the axe.

'Get out!' Pitch shouted, and Jack realised that he was in the way, the axe was too big, its extension too great. Pitch couldn't swing it properly without hurting Jack.

Jack didn't want to leave him, but he backed hurriedly through the door, watching from beyond the threshold, ready to jump back in if needed.

The light guttered and then flared strong, and it bathed the walls, turning the room to the gold of sunrise. The shadows roared displeasure, fought their deaths, but all succumbed to the axe, the light.

Pitch bolted out of the room as soon as he was done, passing Jack and thundering up the stairs, leaping up them three at a time, axe ready. He burst into his room and there was the heavy sound of axe thudding three times into wood before Jack even reached him. Pitch was *fast*.

When Jack arrived, Pitch breathed heavily, axe head resting on the floor. He crouched suddenly and placed his hand flat on the rug, closing his eyes, body tense. He turned his head slowly in both directions, and then opened his eyes with a slow disbelief.

'I believe it is done,' Pitch said. 'This location, at least. If they are stored in boxes elsewhere, we may have an advantage now; trapped within the lead, I am not sure they can communicate to each other. They will not know I have the light.'

Jack leaned against the wall, able to feel his fear for the first time. He felt weak with it.

'They put their mark on you. What did that mean?' Jack said, and Pitch sat down on the edge of his four-poster, despite the fact that the blankets and sheets were ripped, the wood splintered.

'Only that I was not strong enough to resist their prying, and let them move too deep inside of me. I will carry that error with me always, Jack. I will always be a risk to the light. It was a miracle the golden light accepted me when I asked it to. Even without the living shadows, I am always swayed by the dark, its arguments.'

Jack landed next to him on the bed, crouched on his feet and knocked at some of the rubble on the floor with the crook of his staff. His heart raced.

‘They’re really gone?’

‘Yes. They cannot hide from me. Just as I cannot hide from them. I know them as a lodestone knows iron. I had a feeling when we came to Kostroma last time. I should have trusted it.’

Pitch turned and rested the axe on the bed, then tilted his head at the broken post at the corner closest to him. He closed his eyes, flexed his fingers, and then ran his palm along it.

Jack stared in amazement as wood grew from the post itself, and then somehow, seamlessly, the post repaired itself. There was a small, wooden clink down by his feet, and Jack looked down to see two slivers of wood disappear only to be reabsorbed into the post itself.

‘What...the hell?’ Jack said, staring at him.

‘I explained to you that my people have the ability to repair what was broken, to preserve.’

‘Why do I ever have to replace my clothing then? Why don’t you just...with the hand thing? Are you *serious* right now? Have you always been able to do that?’

Pitch smiled at Jack’s amazement, and ran his hand slowly over the bed. Jack watched as threads reached out to one another, tangling, becoming whole once more.

‘I learned recently, again, how to do it. I can only apply this to places of residence; North saw it when I helped him repair the Workshop. I could only do it because I, too, resided there. It’s a peculiar power. I don’t use it often. It is draining.’

‘Then don’t do it,’ Jack said, hurriedly, worried that shadows might still be lurking; wanting Pitch at full energy.

‘No, I shall reclaim this room *today*,’ Pitch said. ‘And then the other rooms, one by one in the future. Kostroma is dear to me. This strange, wooden structure found its way into my heart when I didn’t think I had a heart left. Twee of me to say so, but I will make it mine again.’

Jack watched him smooth his hand along the edge of the rest of the bed, and the magic must have spilled out of him, turning the bed to rights again. Jack got off the bed when a blanket beneath his feet shifted impatiently beneath him. Jack hovered in the air, feeling like he’d stepped into the middle of the twilight zone.

‘It bothered me when I came here and learned that not everyone had the ability to do this. No wonder so little here is built with care, when it is all so impermanent.’

Jack watched Pitch move from place to place within the room, and realised he was probably in the way. He started to come up with a reason to leave, started to float in the direction of the window, when Pitch reached out with a casual hand and hooked it around his ankle. Jack suddenly, viscerally remembered another time Pitch had done that, in the library, and oh...that too had eventually ended in Kostroma, in this room.

He felt the pleasure like a blow to the gut, and exhaled hard.

Pitch blinked at him in surprise, and then a slow smile crept over his face.

‘Stay,’ Pitch said. ‘I like you here. You belong. Like a lamp I didn’t know I needed.’

‘Oh, you did *not*,’ Jack hissed, as Pitch let go of his ankle.

Pitch chuckled to himself, and kept moving through the room, concentrating, turning everything to rights.

\*

Jack stood in the centre of a room that didn’t look like it had ever been destroyed by the Nightmare King. There was still an excess of dust and some pieces of rubble around the place, but the core pieces of furniture, including the bedding, the rugs, the glass, even the holes in the wall...it was all mended.

Pitch sat back on his bed again, as he had before. He looked drawn with tiredness, and Jack wanted to fold his arms around him. Wanted to curl up in his lap.

The events of the night before came back to him; Pitch’s hand on him, a palm and fingers anchoring them both together, and the sweet, thrilling pace of it thumping through his body...

He was scared still, aware that there were still roadblocks and obstacles in his own mind. But they were in Kostroma, and the living shadows were gone, and Jack had said – hadn’t he? – that if they started this side of things again, that he wanted it to be in Kostroma.

‘Are the shadows really gone?’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

‘Yes, Jack. Not in the other locations, I’m sure. But here? Yes. It is just us, and a ward, and a spring creeping towards summer.’

Pitch looked at Jack through lidded, tired eyes.

‘And your fear is manageable, it seems,’ Pitch said, and Jack nodded, swallowing around a dryness in his throat.

‘I want...more,’ Jack said, breath catching as his lungs demanded more air.

Pitch took a deep breath, but Jack wasn’t done.

‘I can’t stand here and not remember,’ Jack said, looking around the room. At the bed where he’d felt cherished, at the window that he’d exited through to go lie in the snow to reclaim back his body temperature after Pitch heated him through so thoroughly he thought he’d be warm forever.

‘I want *more*,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t care if it’s too soon, or if I’m not ready. I miss everything.’

Pitch reached a hand out and grasped the edge of his sweatshirt, drawing him forwards, until Jack was standing between his legs. Jack could feel a rabbit thump of apprehension his heart, he barely knew what he was asking for. Pitch’s gaze was direct, disconcerting. Jack looked away from it, mouth definitely dry.

‘What do you want?’ Pitch said softly, and Jack shivered.

‘Everything,’ Jack said, and then hiccupped a laugh. ‘Which obviously, I can’t do yet.’

‘Not everything,’ Pitch agreed, and then smirked. ‘Maybe *something*.’

He slid off the bed, and Jack stared in surprise at Pitch, who knelt on the floor in front of him – a hand still on his sweatshirt, curving around his side. Pitch looked up with that intense, golden gaze. His eyes were yellower, brighter than ever.

‘Uh,’ Jack said, eloquently.

‘Flustered?’ Pitch said. ‘You don’t seem terrified.’

Jack nodded in agreement, and Pitch’s other hand joined his first, both sliding up Jack’s torso. His hands moved over scars that he couldn’t see, hadn’t felt, and Jack wanted to feel Pitch’s hands on his skin but...

‘I don’t want you to see them,’ Jack said, and Pitch frowned. He looked disappointed for all of a few seconds, until his eyes widened in realisation.

‘This calls for some *innovation*, I think,’ Pitch said, getting up and walking to a mended, large chest of drawers. He opened the top one and brought out a long, fine black length of cloth. He turned it in his fingers, looked over at Jack, and then nodded once as though making a decision. He walked back with a tired grace.

He knelt again at Jack’s feet, then drew the length of black material up to his own eyes, wrapping it carefully but expertly around his head.

‘Wait,’ Jack said. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Like this,’ Pitch said, his voice deepening, ‘I cannot see them, but perhaps...you might let me touch.’

*Oh*, Jack stared down. He rested his hand nervously in Pitch’s hair. Pitch leaned into the touch, and Jack’s hand tightened with a mess of nervousness and affection. Not being able to see Pitch’s eyes was at first disturbing, but then...it made Jack feel like he was safer somehow.

Curiosity twirled inside of him; a small, insistent tendril.

‘Yes,’ Jack said softly, ‘okay. This could be good.’

Pitch reached out and placed his hands on Jack’s hips, bending his head down in concentration.

‘Would you take your sweatshirt off?’ Pitch said, and Jack hesitated, before reaching down to the hem and pulling it up and off himself, dropping it to the floor beside him. He refused to look at his own scars, didn’t really want Pitch to touch them either. He became aware that this could go very, very badly.

But how else would he ever get used to being like this around Pitch again?

‘Your fears,’ Pitch said, his voice lengthening out on his words. ‘They’re azure and cyan, did you know? They’re deepening. I can see that this is hard for you. It’s almost like watching a night sky darken before the weight of a storm.’

Jack swallowed as Pitch went from stroking his thumbs soothingly over Jack’s hipbones, to trailing the fingertips of his right hand up Jack’s body. He moved very slowly, inch by inch, and Jack knew that soon he would crest over the hem of Jack’s pants and touch skin. That very soon, he would feel scar tissue. Jack’s hand clenched in Pitch’s hair involuntarily. He felt unstable, unmoored.

When warm fingertips touched against his bare skin, Jack’s muscles jumped, and Pitch murmured something soothing. Jack blew out a nervous breath of laughter, and then squeezed his own eyes shut as Pitch’s hands kept moving upwards.

Pitch's incremental movement froze as soon as he touched a ridge of scar tissue. Jack knew what it was from; he knew what all his scars were from. Augus' bite when he was in waterhorse-form. It was his worst scar. It hadn't healed well, filled with poison and ripped further apart by Augus' fingers. Jack shuddered, took a deep, rattling breath as Pitch's two hands kept moving upwards, one touching over smooth, unmarked skin, the other finding scar tissue.

Jack's skin was sensitive. There were some places where he couldn't feel anything at all, and other places where he was so attuned, it was as though his nerves had spilled and pooled in a single place, leaving him painfully aware of Pitch's touch.

Pitch's fingers were shaking, and suddenly Pitch straightened, alert, his fingers moving with a purpose. He found the edge of the bite and traced it, his mouth pulling into a frown, his forehead creasing. This was not the 'more' that Jack wanted, but he couldn't find it in himself to step away. When Pitch's hands curled around the back of his ribs and he realised that the scar extended to his back, he froze.

'Let me take the blindfold off,' Pitch said suddenly, voice hard. He reached up automatically to the blindfold, and Jack's hand flashed out, catching him by the wrist.

'Don't,' Jack said, and Pitch's lips thinned.

'This is bad,' Pitch said. 'This is worse than I-'

'Just don't,' Jack said, his voice higher.

Pitch paused, then nodded his head in reluctant assent. However he reached back up and put pressure on Jack's hip, encouraging him to turn. Jack went with the movement and Pitch's hands kept moving over his skin. When Pitch encountered a particularly bad knot of scar tissue, he traced his thumb over it, finding its edges. Jack could hear his breathing. He twisted back to look at Pitch, but aside from seeing that Pitch was obviously unhappy from the set of his mouth, it was hard to tell exactly what he felt.

'This did not heal well. None of it healed well,' Pitch said, and Jack stared out through the window, into the secluded forest beyond them.

'Nope,' Jack said. 'The poison made it worse, apparently. And...being weaker.'

'This is huge,' Pitch said, though it was under his breath, and it sounded like he didn't expect Jack to reply.

Eventually, Pitch had traced the entire shape of the bite. His other hand moved over unmarked skin, edging closer to the scar that Jack had from carrying Pitch's sword up the mountain. But his right hand met up first with the bite that Augus had taken out of his skin in human-form, and as soon as Pitch touched it, Jack jolted away, a rush of fear flooding him. His body reminded him of pain, of being wet from having been half-drowned in a lake even though he didn't need air, he didn't need air, and Augus was saying: 'Were you not aware that ice floats?'

'Jack,' Pitch whispered. 'Jack, it's okay.'

'Turns out...don't really like that one,' Jack said, shaking, and wrapped a hand around his ribs. How could he be a frost spirit, comfortable in the cold, and still feel *cold*?

'I can tell,' Pitch said, and Jack turned back to him. Pitch was kneeling, his hands by his side. He couldn't see anything, Jack trusted in that now, because even though he was trying to look at Jack, his head was tilted so that he was looking just to the side of him.

'I don't want to talk about it,' Jack warned, and Pitch nodded.

'We don't have to.'

'Then...'

Jack stepped back to where he was standing before. He reached down and picked up Pitch's hand. Pitch slid his fingers between Jack's. He swallowed, drew his hand up and rested it just below the bite mark.

Pitch took a deep breath, and then touched it directly, as though he knew exactly where it was.

Jack ground his teeth together, and when Pitch brushed over it a third time, learning its shape, he made a small sound of protest in the back of his throat.

Pitch moved his hand immediately away, to the left, towards Jack's spine, responding, and then tripped over the long scar from Pitch's sword.

'What?' Pitch said in surprise. 'What is this?'

Jack laughed, because his back really was a mess.

'Uh, well. So, your sword is *really* heavy, and apparently if you get wounded by the weapon you carry up the mountain, that, that leaves a-'

'*Jack*,' Pitch breathed, both of his hands moving towards the scar and mapping it, finding where it ended midway down his back and following the line of it up all the way to the back of his shoulders. Pitch's hands were so familiar, and Jack felt the smallest shiver of pleasure at the touch. The sword scar didn't bother him at all.

He was proud of that one.

Pitch laughed softly, in despair.

'What's wrong?' Jack said, and Pitch leaned his forehead against the middle of Jack's back, in the middle of the scar itself. Jack could feel his warm breath gusting against his skin. He felt gooseflesh prickle along his torso.

'Oh, I'm just aware that I like this one a lot,' Pitch said, laughing again. 'I thought my sword was gone, but here it is, etched into you.'

Jack's eyes widened, he swallowed.

'Uh.'

'I apologise,' Pitch said, 'It seems that it only now just really struck me how much you did for *me*. Jack, I am not a person people make heroic gestures for. Not even when I was a General, not then. I inspired a lot of things; but I didn't want closeness. My attitude was that closeness was terrible, it would slow me down. But *this*.'

Pitch traced the line of Jack's scar with both hands, and then ended at Jack's shoulders, squeezing.

'I am actually *horrified* that you valued your life so little, but Jack I have *always* known that you place a terrible premium on your own worth. I imagine you climbing up that ghastly mountain, you must have been in a great deal of pain. Did you not once think about turning back? Giving up?'

‘Not once,’ Jack said, his voice thick. ‘I hated the sword though, a bit.’

Jack started, Pitch had placed his open mouth at the edge of the scar, licked at Jack’s damaged skin and then traced his way along, licking at the whole skin beside it. It felt good. It was heat and warmth and *good*.

‘I just didn’t realise,’ Pitch exhaled against him.

He didn’t elaborate further, and continued kissing Jack’s back. He made his way over to the scars that Augus had made, carefully skirting the smaller bite mark that made Jack uncomfortable, and making his way down to the ridges of the large one that wrapped around his flesh. When Pitch licked at it, Jack groaned, unsure if he liked that or not.

‘You and scars, I swear,’ Jack said, shakily.

‘You wearing them,’ Pitch said, ‘having survived.’

Jack’s mouth quirked up into a small smile. Pitch’s way of looking at the world was so much more grounded. Maybe he was half-delirious with tiredness though, since Pitch dragged his lips slackly across Jack’s back, laving him with his tongue. It was nice, but it lacked his usual coordination.

‘I want more too,’ Pitch said, encouraging Jack to turn and face him. Jack looked down at him, ran a hand through Pitch’s hair, and Pitch moaned as he kissed Jack’s belly, licked at the tender flesh. And then Pitch dropped his mouth down, further, and Jack inhaled sharply when Pitch mouthed Jack’s length through his pants.

*Oh. That kind of more.*

‘I seem to remember,’ Pitch said, voice deepening, and sending a thrill up Jack’s spine, ‘That this made it difficult for you to stand last time. How about...’

Pitch shifted so that Jack was leaning against the mattress, back against one of the wooden posts of the four poster. And Pitch stayed kneeling in front of him, open palms now smoothing up the inside of Jack’s legs, fingers trailing over his calves, behind his knees, up the backs of his thighs, before drawing together at his pants, unfastening them and drawing them down. Jack was hardening already, unable to say a word, the voice stolen from the back of his throat.

Pitch trailed fingertips along his length, teasing, and Jack sighed out a breath.

When Pitch massaged the head of Jack’s cock in his fingers, Jack knew he was in trouble.

‘Are you sure, though?’ Jack said, suddenly feeling an impulse to check. Augus had forced this on him, and Jack knew, Jack *knew* he wasn’t forcing Pitch to do anything, but if he didn’t check...

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, voice thick with want. And Jack opened his mouth to say something, to draw a breath, but Pitch had wrapped a hand around the base of him and slipped his mouth around Jack’s cock. The heat of his mouth was an ache that flushed through him, and he struggled for breath. One of Jack’s hands fisted into Pitch’s hair, unclenching and then tightening again. The other braced himself on the blankets.

Jack didn’t have any words left as Pitch sucked with hungry confidence, driving thoughts out of his head and leaving him unable to register anything but heat, a tongue moving against him, the inside of Pitch’s mouth.

Pitch’s other hand reached up over Jack’s chest, grazed his nipple. Jack cried out, low.

As sensations built inside of him, as Pitch drew his head back and licked at the head of him before swallowing him again, Jack felt a deep bass-line of fear thundering through him. It rolled alongside the arousal, alongside the peak of sensation. He'd felt this before, a fear of letting go.

He opened his mouth on a cry, and Pitch drew the hand at his chest down along his arm and tangled his fingers with Jack's. He didn't stop moving though, and this was a Pitch who showed signs of his old pushiness, who placed demands on Jack's body and drew forth the reactions he wanted.

Jack cried out again and again, arousal just outpacing the strength of his fear, drawing up tight inside of him. Being here in Kostroma, leaning against the bed, Pitch claiming him with an ease that made Jack feel as though he was laid bare...it was too much. Jack's hand tightened hard on Pitch's. Ice crawled up his forearm, spidered down Pitch's hand, and he realised what he was doing and tried to stop it, but couldn't.

Pitch's only response was to suck harder, to press his tongue up and sandwiching Jack against the roof of his mouth. The pressure was exquisite, and the wave of pleasure almost made Jack's knees buckle.

'Pitch,' Jack cried, his voice cracking. '*Close.*'

Pitch let go of Jack's hand, ice cracking along his skin, and pushed Jack's hips back into the bed. He wrapped an arm around him for support, before moving his hand against Jack's length, his own saliva making Jack briefly slick. He withdrew enough to push his tongue into the head of Jack's cock, and Jack's vision flashed white and blue.

His knees buckled and Pitch supported him against the bed, making sure he didn't fall. Jack's free hand braced his own weight as his back arched, and he clutched Pitch's hair, a coarse texture in his fingers. Pleasure twined up with fear and it was a race of energy moving through him as he came, pounding in time with his heart, throbbing in his pulse points. Adrenaline ricocheted alongside heat and release, and he gasped through it.

Pitch kept Jack in his mouth the entire time, licking him, drawing out his orgasm, humming in appreciation. And then when Jack's spasms wound down, Pitch sucked again, drawing forth a sensitivity that made Jack whine, messing up the blankets that Pitch had just neatened with his magic.

Pitch withdrew, and Jack ripped the blindfold off him, staring into his eyes, a mixture of feelings rolling through him. The fear was still there. He felt like, any minute, his mind would throw flashbacks at him, that he would be shown, somehow, that he had done the wrong thing. A smaller part of him, a distant, ancient voice, reminded him that this was not something he got to have.

Pitch's pupils were lust-blown, there was saliva at the corner of his mouth, his lips were swollen. Jack stared at him, and then pulled Pitch against him, reaching out and thrusting a hand into Pitch's pants, curling cold fingers around the hot length of him.

'Jack, you don't have-'

'I know, I *know*,' Jack said, squeezing his hand and pressing his mouth to Pitch's. Jack withdrew just enough to say. 'Help me. Like the very first time. In the Workshop. Please?'

Pitch's hand reached between them both as he stood properly, pulling Jack into him with his arm. He wrapped his fingers around Jack's, drawing Jack's hand into a rhythm that was firm, fast, intense. Jack stretched up, seeking Pitch's mouth, and Pitch brought his lips down and kissed him.



Jack's whole body started to warm, and the addition of Pitch's mouth over his, tongue curling against his in an old gesture that spoke of familiar intimacy, tasting his own come on Pitch's tongue, made him shiver. Pitch was a heat he wanted to melt into.

Jack whimpered when Pitch sped up their hands. And Pitch groaned an encouragement, an approval that made Jack want to do better, to be good for Pitch. All he wanted in that moment was to be good for him, to make him feel a shred of the pleasure that was still coursing alongside the fear in Jack's veins.

Jack's hand tightened, he sped up the pace himself, wanting Pitch undone, wanting to not be the only one with a shattered mess of thoughts in his head, warmth curling through him like embers. Pitch grunted against his mouth and then stiffened, grew in Jack's hand. And Jack nodded, because he wanted that, he was startled to realise that he could have the fear and want that too.

Pitch bent Jack back into the bed as he came, pushing him down so that his knees bent and his back hit the mattress. Pitch pushed hard into Jack's hand, moving away from Jack's mouth to latch onto his neck, biting wetly at the skin he found there, dragging his sharp teeth against sensitive flesh. Jack whimpered, and Pitch exhaled hard at the sound and found his way back to Jack's mouth, licking his way inside and then pausing, mouth open, as he rode out the rest of his orgasm.

Liquid heat painted across Jack's hand, his wrist ached from the awkwardness of where it was trapped between them.

The fear hadn't gone, and Jack stared up at Pitch, wary.

'Are you okay?' Jack said, as Pitch stared back at him.

'It is...considerably more fear than I'm used to,' Pitch said, his voice not yet back to normal. 'But, yes. Yes. Are you okay?'

Jack thought about it, couldn't not under the serious weight of that gaze, and pushed himself back onto the bed properly as Pitch crawled onto it. They ended up side by side, Jack still had his pants tangled around his ankles, and Pitch's robe was clean, but his pants were a mess.

'I want to be better,' Jack said, curling into Pitch's side. 'I want your hands in my hair again. It feels weird.'

'It's getting easier,' Pitch said, wrapping an arm around Jack's side and listing into his slight form, covering him with warmth. 'Don't forget that it will continue to get easier.'

'It was never easy though,' Jack whispered. 'Not from the beginning, was it? I was always afraid.'

Pitch sighed, holding Jack close.

'Yes,' Pitch said. 'You were always afraid.'

Jack nodded to himself. It saddened him to think that even if he continued to erode the grip that August's actions had over him, there was an older, more ancient fear beneath that.

'I want it to be easier,' Jack said, closing his eyes. 'It's stupid, but I just want to not feel like this all the time. The fear. I suppose you find that weird huh, given your centre and everything.'

Was Pitch's centre even still fear? Jack wasn't sure, now that he thought about it.

'No,' Pitch said softly, 'I don't find that strange at all. I want the same thing.'

Jack pressed his face into Pitch's chest and breathed in the scent of him, the scent of what they'd done. It was grounding, it made him feel like he was a part of something. He didn't want to leave.

'We should go back to the Workshop,' Jack said, voice small.

'Not yet,' Pitch said, tracing the back of his fingers down the centre of Jack's back, finding the line of his scar and following it.

'I'd do it again,' Jack said, referring to the scar, smiling as his body started to relax, as tension wound out of him.

'Are there any more scars?' Pitch asked quietly, and Jack shook his head, and then remembered. It was the one he always forgot about it. The one that his hair and sweatshirt hid. The one that had healed the quickest of all of them.

'I wore...the necklace,' Jack said hesitantly. 'The chain with the locket on it. I took that locket with me everywhere, even before I had the chain.'

Pitch tensed, the breath stilled in his lungs.

'The Nightmare King just threw it away,' Jack said, chest heaving as he remembered how casually it had been tossed to the ground, how much Jack had known in that moment that Pitch was lost to him. 'It...'

His eyes burned with salt water and he squeezed them shut.

'So I took the locket with me everywhere. And when they said, at the top of the mountain, there was a little bit left...I asked them for a chain. Something that I could wear. Something I could give back to you. But...on the back of my neck, where a necklace would rest, I have a really thin scar there.'

Pitch's hand came up immediately, found the line of it. It was a very neat, long scar, and Pitch traced it with a single finger.

'*He* noticed it,' Jack breathed. 'And of course the chain wouldn't break, so, that happened instead.'

It was all he wanted to say about it. He still remembered the dread he'd felt when August had casually commented on destroying the locket.

'You carried the sword and the locket,' Pitch said to himself. 'You did all that for me?'

'No,' Jack said, smiling through his tears. 'I mean yes, but really, no. I'm selfish, Pitch. I couldn't imagine life without you. I did it for me.'

Pitch folded his arms tightly around Jack, and Jack laughed a wet sound against Pitch's chest. Jack didn't care about the Workshop, didn't want to go back. He wanted to stay in the house where Pitch had defeated the shadows, in the room where Pitch's magic had healed a broken space, where he felt a safety that pushed away the worst of the real world.

So they stayed.

In our next chapter, 'Brothers,' Gwyn finally enacts his plan and attempts to take down one of the most destructive Kings the fae kingdoms have ever seen.

# Brothers

## Chapter Notes

Hoo boy.

\*

Can you believe that after this chapter, there's only 9 left? We're heading slowly towards the finish line now folks, yall have been the greatest company.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack shifted comfortably on Pitch's bed as a warm hand stole its way down his bare arm. Jack hadn't slept, but Pitch had needed to, and he'd drifted off as soon as they'd stopped talking.

'Jack,' Pitch said sleepily, and Jack could hear the smile in his voice.

'Yeah?'

'You do realise that you took my blindfold off, don't you?'

Jack's eyes flew open and he suddenly realised that he was naked – *naked* – and that Pitch had seen his scars, and-

'Don't look!' Jack gasped, and then realised it was too late for that. Pitch, however, placed a hand over his eyes anyway and then started chuckling as he turned onto his back. Jack stared down at himself, in shock, and then crawled off the bed quickly and pulled his sweatshirt back on.

'I forgot...' Jack admitted, embarrassed, and Pitch smiled at the ceiling he couldn't see.

'Then I suppose you were more ready than you thought. It's okay, Jack. I 'saw' all I needed to see when you allowed me to touch them.'

Jack took several deep breaths as he settled his sweatshirt. The panic receded. He had literally forgotten all about it, and he realised that...that was a good thing. He was sure that if he'd started off naked, with Pitch able to see everything, he would have called it quits as soon as possible. But starting off with the blindfold, and being able to let himself into the moment meant that he'd been able to do something that he could have sworn was impossible.

'Huh,' Jack said to himself.

'What's that?' Pitch said, and Jack shrugged, swooped back onto the bed, and reached out hesitantly, removing Pitch's hand from where it rested over his eyes.

'I guess I am getting better,' Jack said, and Pitch nodded in quiet agreement.

'I forgot, myself,' Pitch said. 'I had other things to pay attention to at the time.'

Jack remembered the eager way he'd pulled Pitch to him, thrust his hand between them both to grasp, and flushed.

‘Uh, yeah, there was that.’

Pitch tangled his fingers in Jack’s, and they looked at each other for another long moment. Jack felt something painful and fluttery in his heart. Could it be possible that after everything, he would get to have this again?

‘We should go back,’ Jack said. Pitch squeezed his hand, and Jack felt a creeping, small flash of fear in response to the touch and moved his hand away. He smiled in apology, but Pitch didn’t look bothered.

‘We should tell Gwyn that this is at least one thing that he doesn’t need to burden himself with,’ Pitch said.

Jack wanted to agree. After all, what he’d just seen Pitch do with those living shadows was incredible. He poked at the axe that was like a third person taking up room on the bed. Pitch sat up, stretching his arms out in front of him, splaying his fingers.

‘In the lead up to Christmas, that Workshop becomes remarkably oppressive.’

‘North likes it,’ Jack said, and Pitch gazed at him blackly.

‘How *fun* for him. Shall we return?’

‘I’ll freeze you some elves, will that cheer you up?’

Pitch’s expression cleared somewhat, but he still looked pensive. Jack wished he could take his hand again, but even after what they’d done, even after the intimacy they’d shared, sometimes the fear of being touched crept over him and left him separate from others. He grimaced in apology, and Pitch shook his head, standing up and sliding his axe off the bed.

‘Do not fear that you’ve caused my mood,’ Pitch said, placing his finger directly on Jack’s building apprehension. ‘My past follows me around like a plague, the Workshop is a cacophony that chafes, and I enjoy you, but I do not get enough time to enjoy you.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, and Pitch smiled at him, holding out his hands for Jack to step into them. When Jack hesitated, Pitch waited patiently.

‘I suppose it must seem sometimes that I am not filled to the brim with petty gripes and complaints, but I am,’ Pitch said with a rueful smile.

‘Sometimes you seem like a badass sort of warrior,’ Jack said.

‘No,’ Pitch said, ‘someone lied to you. It’s for the most part; gripes and complaints.’

‘And cinnamon cookies,’ Jack said, delight stealing through him. Banter with Pitch was one of his favourite things.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said in firm agreement. He tightened his arms around Jack, murmured a low, soothing noise when Jack tensed, transporting them through the darkness.

\*

They landed in Pitch’s room and immediately, even through the closed door, spilled the sounds of toys and music, of yeti roaring to each other across the landings because they no longer just walked to each other and quietly asked for what they wanted or needed. Now it was yelling. The yeti were

– apparently – too busy to leave their worktables.

Jack saw the small card of fine cardstock resting on Pitch's replaced chest of drawers, beside the sand snowflake that Sandy had made for him. Jack picked it up, heart pounding. He'd gotten missives from Gwyn before.

'A note from Gwyn?' Pitch said.

*Alright, so he does this with everyone then. Maybe someone should introduce him to the telephone.*

The script was finely rendered, this time in a deep, midnight blue ink. It was the kind of writing that one expected to find in a book of illuminations, or on a wedding invitation. It still jarred Jack to realise that this was Gwyn's normal writing script.

Jack read the note quickly, and then handed it to Pitch without a word.

*Clear your schedule. Friday we finalise details. Saturday we execute the plan, and we shall see what will befall us.*

Jack had a moment to think of how Gwyn had a flare for melodrama, before blankness moved through him. He stared at the wall for a long moment. He'd been pushing this part of reality aside ever since Gwyn had told him about the plan. He felt sick and sat heavily on Pitch's bed.

Pitch turned the card over in his fingers, pensive.

'You may not like the side of me that you see, Jack. The side that Gwyn has asked for.'

'I know,' Jack said.

He wasn't a fool. He knew that whatever was keeping Pitch so quiet about the subject of revenge, was an idea that Pitch found immeasurably satisfying to contemplate. And Jack knew – very well indeed – that Pitch had a dark streak that his cruelty hadn't and likely wouldn't ever be completely eroded. Pitch was able to keep that away from Jack, especially as he gained increasing control over himself, but being possessed by the shadows had changed his physiology. He would always have an access to darkness that Jack wouldn't like.

But then Jack would always have an ability to turn the planet into Snowball Earth. So he figured they were even.

'As long as you're there to snap me out of any compulsions, it'll be...' Jack looked down at the floor. 'Yeah, I can't even pretend this is going to be okay.'

'It's not too late to back out. Gwyn can-'

'Maybe he can. Maybe. But if someone doesn't lure August out of the Court...and Gwyn is right – maybe Ash could, maybe you could, but if it's *me*...'

Pitch sighed. It was true after all. If it was Jack, on his own – vulnerable – August was far more likely to approach with his guard down. As Gwyn had pointed out to Jack; August had made *himself* vulnerable when he'd openly attacked Jack and dragged him down into the lake. And he'd been reckless by taunting the soldiers and Gwyn afterwards. It was a level of carelessness for his own wellbeing that Gwyn wanted to exploit.

It didn't stop the nausea building in Jack's gut.

'I don't want to be compelled again,' Jack whispered, and Pitch stiffened.

He crumpled the card in his hands. Jack could feel the tension and anger radiating off Pitch in waves. But then, with what must have been a monumental amount of effort, Pitch forced himself to calm. How he did it, Jack had no idea, but when he looked up, Pitch looked thoughtful, concerned.

'I didn't want you *near* him,' Pitch said, 'I don't want you near him now.'

'He could compel me to kill myself,' Jack said, voice small.

'Do you think so?' Pitch said sceptically. 'I doubt it. Augus has sadistic tendencies, like the Nightmare King. He'd think of plenty of other things to do before something like that.'

'*Not* reassuring,' Jack said, shivering.

'I know,' Pitch said gravely.

They sat in silence for some time; the jovial noise of the Workshop streaming in towards them. Jack wondered what the other Guardians were doing, he wondered when it was that he'd ended up a part of a fae war, and not looking after children like he was meant to. All the way back when Jamie had died? Or had it been when the Nain Rouge had put her mark on him permanently, drawing him into battle?

Either way, he was a part of it now.

\*

Jack noticed the ring as soon as Gwyn arrived; Gwyn did not wear jewellery. Not even a crown, though Jack remembered him saying he had one. Jack pointed to the ring curiously, asking a silent question. Gwyn looked at the heavy, golden ring around his index finger and frowned.

'It will allow me to interfere with the matters of the Unseelie Court and demote Augus. I may only use it once.'

Gwyn placed a small charm carefully on the table. It looked like several bound pieces of grass, with a long, green rock sandwiched in the middle. It looked like something a child might make, except that the rock looked valuable.

Jack pointed at that and Gwyn rubbed at his forehead.

'It's how I'm able to communicate with Ash.'

'Yeah, we could do with one of those,' Jack said, and Pitch grunted assent. Gwyn shook his head curtly.

'Make do without. I do not like being at everyone's beck and call. When this war is over, I plan on setting those horns on fire.'

Gwyn's eyes widened at his own comment, and then he looked oddly abashed.

'Of course I would never do that,' he added, chagrined. 'They're the legacy of the Seelie Court.'

'These must have kept you busy,' Pitch said, indicating the ring, the charm. Jack was grateful that Pitch was keeping the subject away from the worst of the plan. He didn't want to think about *any* part of the plan.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Also, recovering Gulvi’s lost sister. She was still alive.’

‘What?’ Jack said, eyes widening. ‘Gulvi said her sisters were dead.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘It sounded as though that is what she said, but she said that one of her sisters was lost. Gulvi had presumed her dead, but lost...means a body wasn’t recovered. I decided to look. Julvia is alive, though poorly. There is a small chance she may recover a measure of health, but she’ll never be strong enough to shift out of swan-form into human-form. I needed all the leverage I could get, it was worth looking. Gulvi would not so easily assist me with Ash otherwise. Returning her sister to her means that Gulvi owes me a large debt. And fae do not like to be indebted to other fae.’

Jack realised that just like that, Gwyn had brought them back to the plan anyway. He lowered his forehead to the table and splayed his fingers on it. He let the frost spill, it was the only way to deal with his nerves.

‘That is quite something, to go searching for a sister everyone had presumed dead,’ Pitch said, and Gwyn didn’t look up, only stared at the ring on his finger, the space between his eyebrows creased.

‘Is it?’ Gwyn said, absently. ‘Lost is not dead.’

‘Gulvi couldn’t find her,’ Pitch persisted. Jack realised that Gwyn had done something unusual. Gulvi couldn’t find her own sister, she would have looked. She obviously cared for her family. It would have sounded – to anyone else – like a lost cause. Why did Gwyn take it up?

‘I am good at finding what is lost,’ Gwyn said, looking up, the dark circles under his eyes almost bruises at this point. His hair was a rough tangle, and his clothing was creased; though, for once, it wasn’t covered in blood.

‘I can’t believe Ash agreed to do what you asked him to,’ Jack said, and Gwyn looked at him.

‘He doesn’t want his brother to die. And if this fails, I *will* kill him.’

It was a powerful statement, coming from Gwyn. Despite everything, Jack knew very well of Gwyn’s personal reluctance to kill someone he had considered a friend.

‘Do you think he will not do it?’ Gwyn said, a challenge in his voice. His eyes had turned flinty.

‘No, I...I think he’ll do it. Ash just...loves him. So of course he will. And I know what I did for my sister. You do things that you, you just- That’s what you do for family.’

‘Jack...’ Pitch said, looking at him with an odd expression on his face. Jack knew immediately what Pitch must be thinking and felt a need to explain himself.

‘It’s not like I feel sorry for August, not for him! I just...Ash sees something worth loving. To the point where he’s willing to do that? I feel sorry for Ash.’

‘Do not do this,’ Gwyn said, voice hard. ‘*Don’t*. You of all people have *no* reason to feel anything for either of them. You are not a part of their world, and you-’

‘-Jack’s always empathised uncommonly well with others,’ Pitch interrupted.

‘You introduced us so that Ash would feel sorry for me, to make him *more* likely to do what you wanted,’ Jack said. ‘You thought that would be a one way street? That I’d feel nothing in return?’



Gwyn looked furious, but aside from a muscle jumping in his jaw, he remained still, said nothing.

‘You don’t understand us at all, do you?’ Jack said, anger coursing through him. He stiffened and faced Gwyn square on.

‘You and Ash are not an *‘us,’*’ Gwyn said.

‘Well, we’re not like you,’ Jack said, and Gwyn’s expression didn’t change, his body didn’t move, but Jack could tell that what he’d said had an impact. Pitch watched them both, cleared his throat.

‘When does Jack need to start wearing the scarf?’

Gwyn looked away from Jack after a few more seconds, and then pursed his lips.

‘Today. He should be wearing it for the first stage of the plan.’

Jack nodded slowly. The first part would be the easiest, Jack had briefed the other Guardians about it so they wouldn’t freak out.

‘Are you sure Augus will compel me to discharge my power again?’ Jack said, and Gwyn smiled coldly.

‘In that, he is predictable; it is his favourite way of disarming powerful fae. I am sure he will.’

‘And if you’re wrong?’ Pitch said, and Gwyn shook his head.

‘Talk to me about how wrong I am after this is over.’

Jack didn’t understand him at all. Gwyn didn’t seem to understand love or friendship or even people, and yet in a war situation, he seemed to understand all those things enough to use them to his best advantage. The cold certainty he displayed about his plan was not reassuring. It wasn’t so much that Jack had a feeling things would go wrong – this was nothing like the school attacks, which had been last minute and disorganised. It was that even if everything went to plan...

Jack shuddered.

‘We will go over this one more time,’ Gwyn said, spreading his hands out on the table and taking a quick, deep breath.

Jack paid close attention and found himself unexpectedly grateful for the brief period of time his centre had been resolve. It gave him the ability to concentrate, to care about what Gwyn was saying, to interject with worthwhile questions but most of all...it gave him an ability to push the worst of his fear aside. He knew he’d pay for that later, but right now he was resolved to see this through, and the energy rose inside of him; a cold, heavy sureness that fear would not stop him from doing what he had to do.

\*

Jack sped through the air, putting on extra speed and flying at such high altitude that even the cumulus was far below him and he couldn’t see the land beneath. He wore a pale green scarf wrapped and knotted tightly around his middle, hidden by his sweatshirt. His heart pounded a sharp, furious tattoo. He was alone, and the one winged messenger that had followed him when he’d escaped the Workshop’s ward had been stopped by the ice-storm that Jack had summoned, thick with lightning and hail and shards of ice.

Everything was going to plan.

*Unfortunately. Stupid plan.*

The first two parts had been feats of acting. On Friday evening Jack had flown to the very edges of the ward, shouting that he was done with being afraid, that he was angry, that he would *get* him. Followed by Toothiana and Sandy dragging him back, saying that it wasn't safe, it wasn't worth it, he needed to stay within the wards.

Jack had thrown himself into the role he was supposed to play easily, because the truth was he was very sick of the wards. And he *did* want this all over. It was easy enough then to shout it and know that the winged messengers were out there listening, know that they would pass the message onto Augus.

A nervous night had followed. Three times, Jack went to the top of one of the Workshop towers and stared longingly past the wards. Three times he hoped that the messengers had seen him, on his own, staff in hand and the wind whipping around him.

Three times he had gone back to Pitch and been too scared and too sick to walk into his arms, where he wanted to be.

Wearing the scarf made it harder. Not a single day went by, wearing Makara's first scarf, that he had felt comfortable or okay with himself. Wearing a second one – even though it was obvious that it didn't negatively affect Pitch – was bad news. After the first hour of wearing it – acting upbeat and frenetically cheerful – he'd curled into a ball on Pitch's bed and Pitch had sat by him, worried and unable to place a single hand on him.

At that point, Pitch had talked about calling the horn, backing out of the plan. Jack refused. Once, before going to the school to fight, he'd been the one to ask Pitch if they could just escape. Now he was the one saying they had to do it. He hated himself a little bit, then.

Jack put on an extra burst of speed when he hit a discontinuity in the polar jet-stream, but soon found himself picked up by the high altitude winds again, pushing him forth effortlessly. He had to travel like this; everyone else would teleport.

The second part of the plan had been sneaking out early on Saturday morning, after staring at Pitch and trying to convince himself for over five minutes that he *could* touch him, they could have *something* before things possibly fell apart. But minutes ticked by and Jack couldn't, and his fear ratcheted up, until finally Pitch clenched his hands in frustration and Jack realised that it would be better if he just left.

The Guardians, about an hour after he'd left and sailed up high into the skies, were under orders to shout his name through the Workshop, looking for him. Pitch was to wander outside the wards, looking panicked.

Jack was pretending to be on a solo revenge mission.

He was so powerful now that he didn't truly fear the winged messengers anymore. He was more frightened of what he might do should anyone attack him. With his ability to be fleet in the air, and call storm and ice to him without thinking about it, he was lethal.

There was a spell traced onto the back of his hand, and it tingled a pulling sensation at him. He followed the sensation until it died down again. A homing beacon, the spell was something Gwyn had given him, 'a trifle,' to make sure that he went to the right place. Gwyn had already picked out

a route that he'd imagined Jack might take on his own, if he was determined to get revenge.

Once more, it would place Gwyn and himself belowground again, near the Unseelie Court. Jack hoped that would mean they were lucky – after all, they'd defeated the Nightmare King underground. But Jack didn't believe in luck, so he went through all the stages of the plan again in his head, pretended that the thin air and the high speed were forcing him to gasp his breaths, because that was preferable over knowing he was hyperventilating.

Hours later he touched down on land, wary. This was, perhaps, one of the most riskier parts of the plan. Jack listened to the spell on the back of his hand, the energy of it encouraging him first in one direction, then the next. He had his staff up and out and navigated a dark forest, aware of eyes watching him. What eyes, he couldn't tell. At one point, a deer flushed from beneath a thick yew tree with low hanging branches, but Jack still couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

Jack floated through the forest until finally he came to a rocky outcrop; a dark, dank cave leading into the ground. It was half-covered by thick vines and cobweb, looked disused. Jack flew into the cave's maw, and immediately iced the opening shut behind him. If he had to leave hastily, the ice would obey him in an instant. But it would make it very hard for anyone to follow him.

He descended slowly down a disused staircase. The stone steps, ill-maintained, had started falling apart. The descent itself wasn't safe for anyone who couldn't float, and Jack was grateful that he could fly, even as he cringed every time roots pushing down through the ceiling brushed the top of his head.

Ten minutes after that, and he had to stop and place a hand over his mouth and nose, fear making his breathing too loud. He was on his own and terrified. He was going to kill Gwyn, absolutely kill him. This place gave him the creeps. It had widened out into caverns, barely lit with blue phosphorescence on the walls. At the first sight of a mangled human skeleton on the floor, Jack wanted to scream.

Gwyn had warned him it might be disturbing, but he hadn't said *why*.

Jack stood, hand over his face, pulling himself together. He looked for the old centre of resolve and made a mental grab for it.

He wanted to laugh, hysterically.

What had ever made him think he could do this?

After a few minutes, the shaking lessened and the spell on the back of his hand tugged more insistently. Jack's throat worked on a gag and he swallowed repeatedly. He realised that if he didn't do his part of the plan, he was going to end up on the floor in the middle of a dank cave near the Unseelie Court, whimpering.

*Not a good look for anyone.*

Jack took a deep breath and forced himself forwards.

He flew into a large cave. There was a river gently running alongside one of the walls, carving out a sinuous space for itself as the years went by. Elsewhere, ancient marble slabbing, some of it still flat and seamless, in other places broken and smashed as though giant fists had pounded into it. Torches in brackets along the walls blazed a bright, green light.

Jack didn't know how he knew, but he suspected those torches had been burning for years, and that no one came down to maintain them. At least there was light to see by.

Unfortunately that meant there were more skeletons to see.

He flew near the edge of the room and suddenly the spell sent a cold ping through his hand and then disappeared. He was where he was supposed to be. He was-

*'Don't move.'*

Jack's eyes had enough time to widen in horror, adrenaline a dump of fear through the back of his spine, when he froze in place. He hadn't expected August so quickly. The compulsion was horribly familiar, set his teeth on edge. His chest heaved on a silent sob.

August stepped out of another entrance, looking around warily, before offering a quiet, almost serene smile to Jack. He was well-dressed as always, black boots complementing long, dark pants, a dark green shirt buttoned up the middle and finished with a wide collar. But like Gwyn, Jack saw that he looked tired. There were circles under his eyes. He looked paler.

Jack's fear banked just long enough to remind him that this was what they'd hoped for. That August, too, was not doing well with a disintegrated Court and the burden of his own mental state.

'So you are still weak to the compulsions,' August said. 'I wondered if you'd learn a measure of resistance, but obviously not. You do realise, then, that coming here alone was dangerous?'

August walked towards Jack, then leaned insouciantly against the wall, crossing one leg against the other. He looked up at the ceiling as though he could see past it, and then examined his clawed fingernails.

'He'll be upset, I think, when I kill you.'

Jack's heart hammered frantically in his chest.

'But more upset, I think, if I break you beyond reckoning. It was something *he* taught me, in fact.'

August smiled at his own comment, and then his face hardened and he directed his green gaze at Jack. There was nothing but coldness in his expression, a brittle edge that promised Jack that if the others didn't turn up, if August got his hands on him, Jack would be tortured into something unrecognisable. Jack stared at him, having no choice, unable to move, body trembling against the force of the compulsion itself.

*'Point your staff at the ground,'* August said.

And there, Jack felt a thrill of nervous tension alongside the fear.

This was it. This was what was supposed to happen.

He concentrated as he pointed his staff to the ground. This was the part where he had to get it right.

'What, exactly, was revenge supposed to be?' August said. He hadn't moved away from the wall, and Jack slid his eyes sideways and stared at him. 'I'm King. There's no status beyond it. I'm as invulnerable as a fae can be, and I was powerful before that. There was nothing you could have done, no matter the strength of your power. Perhaps you can let that console you? But then, I don't particularly want you to feel consoled.'

August looked almost bored, but there was something off about it. Time passed where August said nothing at all, and Jack thought he looked lost in thought or somehow...not present. Not like last time, where he was simply a malicious force of nature.

‘Anyway, *discharge your power.*’

*This was it.*

Jack gritted his teeth, forced himself to concentrate as ice exploded out of him, the compulsion pushing it forward. There was a huge boom, a white flash. Jack made sure he concentrated on August; it wasn’t hard to do, given the rabbit frantic thoughts in his mind.

The floor around him froze in a wide diameter, and a jagged river of ice flooded out in August’s direction, freezing his feet before he could move and pinning him up against the wall.

Jack’s power kept flooding out of him even as he saw Pitch materialise from the darkness. Had he been waiting there the entire time?

August was able to melt ice, but not as quickly as Jack was making it. And Jack’s ice was colder than it used to be. August had compelled him to discharge his power, and Jack could make his ice as strong as he wanted. His mind *wanted* to get rid of the power, *wanted* it to come out cold and strong and powerful.

August’s eyes locked on Pitch, face shifting from outrage to shock.

But Pitch didn’t move towards August. He ran over to Jack, slipping on ice and catching himself by burying his axe into it, using it to support his weight. He grabbed Jack’s face in his fingers and forced his face up, and Jack was ready for it, dragged his eyes to meet golden ones.

Fear moved through him in a torrent, scouring away the compulsion and leaving Jack’s mind his own. He gagged on fear, every beat of his heart pained, but it worked. When Pitch looked away, Jack flew backwards as he’d been instructed. He kept sending a steady stream of liquid ice towards August, keeping him pinned by his legs to the floor, refreezing whatever August melted into water.

‘Come to rescue your lost lamb?’ August spat at Pitch, not looking at Jack once now that Pitch had entered.

Pitch walked over to him, a cold expression on his face.

‘Rescue?’ Pitch said, smiling. ‘Oh, how *silly* of me, were you really so taken by Jack’s revenge mission? Do you really think I’m here to *rescue* him? Who do you think is the one who *really* wants revenge, August?’

August suddenly averted his eyes from Pitch, shuddered, and Jack realised that Pitch was still using his fear trick, still inspiring terror.

‘Look at me,’ Pitch said, calm. There was a sinister promise in his voice that curdled Jack’s blood. He remembered Pitch saying that he wouldn’t like the side of him he’d present, and Jack felt ill. He focused instead on the ice, the frost, the resolve inside of him. ‘No?’

August got one of his legs free, and Jack slammed it back into the wall with ice, gritting his teeth. August was melting the ice faster now. He hoped Gwyn arrived soon, this wasn’t going to work for long.

Pitch kept approaching August, picking his way through the ice.

‘Do you think that I can’t be like him? Did you think you were free of it? You think that I, too, can’t be vindictive, or cruel? That I, too, don’t want to see you left alone down in the *dark*? You’d hurt my Jack, and you think that I wouldn’t want everything that the shadows *did* to you? I have a

bottomless pit with your name on it, and it still reeks of your terror.'

Jack had expected many things when Pitch approached him. But he hadn't expected the growing horror on August's face, the leeching of colour as his eyes locked on a fixed point in the distance and didn't move again. He tensed to the point of shaking when Pitch finally reached him, and Jack felt a corresponding fear when Pitch leaned down to August and whispered something in his ear.

It didn't seem possible that August's fear could grow greater, but Jack swore that he could feel it rolling off the King of the Unseelie fae in waves.

'He did anything he wanted to you, once,' Pitch crooned, as he took a step back. He didn't even look at Jack, his mouth curving into a grin that was pure Nightmare King.

'Jack,' August hissed, '*You will-*'

'No,' Pitch reprimanded, and lashed out with his hand, reaching for August's face, determined to diminish him with fear. August's unfrozen arms came up quickly – Jack couldn't get a clear shot to freeze them as August raked claws down Pitch's forearm, growling.

Gulvi appeared in the room, Ash clutched in her grip, wings flared and gales of wind announcing her presence. Ash stepped towards August immediately, then froze. Jack stared at them, ice absently streaming out of his staff towards August.

'Hey!' Ash shouted, and Jack thought he sounded protective, furious to see August struggling against the Nightmare King.

August stilled and turned, eyes widening. Pitch dropped his bleeding arm, quiet.

Gwyn had told them it wouldn't take long. That once Ash arrived and Gwyn followed after, it wouldn't take long at all. That, if it went to plan...

Jack was shaking so hard that he had to concentrate to make sure he had a good grip on his staff.

'Ash!' August shouted, a thread of hope in his voice at seeing the last member of his dissolved Court. The brother that swore that August had once been good. He seemed not to have noticed Gulvi at all. Then he turned back to stare at Pitch, and his face twisted.

'Ash, go!' August cried, turning back. 'This isn't safe! It's...'

He'd noticed Gulvi. Jack noticed August wasn't even melting the water at his feet anymore. The clenched hands at his side went limp.

'Oh,' August said. The word so quiet, that only the cave walls around them were able to catch it and keep it close. For a long moment, August and Ash stared at each other. Ash's eyes were already wet, his mouth thin. He staggered a few more steps towards August, before Gulvi stepped forwards and grabbed his shirt, pulling him back.

When light filled the room and Gwyn teleported in, August laughed.

'I should have known,' August said.

'Yes,' Gwyn said, withdrawing his sword. 'You should have.'

August flicked his gaze over to Gwyn only briefly, took him in with a quick glance that still dripped derision despite his fear. Immediately his eyes locked on the ring on Gwyn's finger, and he blinked

at it, and then turned back to stare at Ash.

His words were for Gwyn.

‘The artefact only works if I agree to rescind the Kingship,’ August said, voice smooth. ‘And I do *not*.’

‘You will,’ Gwyn said, a coldness in his voice that matched Pitch’s for simple, confident cruelty.

Ash stepped forwards, shaking. He looked at Gwyn, looked at Jack, looked back at August as though he was drowning. Jack wondered if he was even sober.

‘Don’t you think...this has gone on long enough, brother?’

‘What did he say, Ash? Did he tell you it was the only way you could save me? Did he spin pretty tales about the past? About how once it was different, and oh, Ash, did he tell you only to think about my welfare? Did he ply you with whiskey and force his glamour on you and- No wonder you’ve been visiting so many bars lately. *So* much to think over.’

Ash swallowed, said nothing. He blinked and tears fell out of his eyes. He didn’t seem to have noticed.

‘It’s this or execution,’ Gwyn said quietly, and August didn’t look away from Ash.

‘Please,’ Ash said, voice surprisingly even despite his obvious anguish. ‘Please, August. Let it be over.’

‘Personally,’ Pitch interjected, ‘I’m hoping for execution. *Personally*, perhaps you might give August and I a moment, and then we’ll see how-’

Pitch never finished his sentence, because August turned to stare at him in dread and Pitch flashed a quick, predatory grin. August stilled, paralysed, and Pitch stepped forwards, glaring fear into his being, not stopping when Ash shouted a protest, not stopping when August started trembling, unable to look away. Not stopping until Gwyn roared that he halt, shaking the room with the force of his voice.

August slumped, and Ash was crying out his name. For a moment Jack thought he was unconscious, but then he forced his head up, forced his eyes to Pitch’s defiantly. But as he took in Pitch’s face, something pained moved across August’s expression; an old, heavy agony. Jack was startled to realise he recognised it. He had only ever associated August with expressions of emotions that Jack had nothing to do with – cruelty, condescension, derision. But this...Jack recognised.

‘You threw me away,’ August whispered, voice breaking. ‘You moulded me into your likeness and then you...’

August squeezed his eyes shut, his brow furrowed. His hands came up to his head and he grasped at it, briefly, as though fighting something inside of himself. When he looked up again, faced Pitch, he drew himself upright properly, dragged dignity back to his posture. Cruelty stole over his features, a familiar crisp smile crept over his face.

‘But every time *he* has a nightmare about me, I will be there,’ August hissed. ‘Every time you remember the *dead*, I will be there. *Me*.’

Gwyn approached, sword out, navigating the slick ice effortlessly.

‘Augus Each Uisge, your crimes against the fae Kingdoms – both Seelie and Unseelie – are innumerable. Restitution can never be made, execution is what any other King or Queen would bring down upon you. I am not without mercy. Voluntarily give up your Kingship and your status, and-’

‘No,’ Augus cut him off, and Jack realised that Augus was melting the water at his legs again. Jack refroze it, and Augus growled in frustration. ‘You want me to give it up, then find a way to make me. I’ll not volunteer it.’

‘I have found a way to make you,’ Gwyn said, sheathing his sword. ‘I just rather thought you’d prefer not to involve Ash in this.’

Augus looked like he’d been struck in the face, he turned and stared at Ash.

‘Don’t look at me like that, *please*,’ Ash said, voice breaking. ‘Don’t you remember how it used to be? Remember when it was just the two of us? You and I against the world? I didn’t want to be here, like this.’

‘And yet here you are,’ Augus said, voice heavy. ‘Shall I call you turncoat? What would you have me call you? Traitor? This is the sort of treason I could execute my Inner Court for.’

But Augus didn’t sound like he meant it.

‘Augus, you don’t know what they’ve asked me to do,’ Ash whispered, tortured. ‘What I agreed to do.’

‘You’ve always hated those shadows, haven’t you?’ Gwyn said to Augus. ‘You asked your brother to carry them, but never carried them yourself; not a single one. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?’

Augus stared at Ash in horror.

‘Ash...’

‘I think we *can* make you give up that Kingship,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I’m giving you the choice. Volunteer the Kingship now, or surrender it under duress. It makes no difference to me.’

‘Ash!’ Augus shouted, and Ash looked away.

‘I can’t,’ Ash said. ‘I can’t do it. I can’t. I thought I could but I fucking *can’t*.’

Gulvi’s fingers splayed behind him, she rested her palms on the hilts of her daggers and then opened her mouth to speak, furious, but Gwyn cut across her.

‘You must. Or I will slay him in front of you.’

‘No,’ Ash said, staring at him. He turned to stare at Augus, desperate. ‘Augus, come on, please, will you just- Augus, *please*.’

‘Didn’t you hear him?’ Augus said, and Jack could hear a thread of it now, the defeat in his voice. ‘You must.’

‘Brother, Jesus fucking Christ, will you just-’

‘-Did you commit to his plan without thinking you’d have to follow through? No, I want to see this for myself. Listen to him, Ash. Go on, now. The other King. The one who isn’t your brother. Didn’t you hear him?’



‘August, I tried *so* hard, the past few years I’ve...’

‘No one would say that you hadn’t,’ August said, serious, an odd expression on his face. ‘I would never say that you didn’t try.’

The room began to shake, and Jack realised what was happening. Gwyn did too, and as Jack poured ice through the ground, turning it to permafrost, Gwyn withdrew his sword again. August had begun to melt the ground beneath his feet, to turn it all to water so that he could teleport away. The ice prevented it, and August gritted his teeth but didn’t so much as glance at Jack or Gwyn.

‘Do it, Ash,’ August taunted, ‘You’re going to have to. I’m going to *make* you. It’s only been three thousand years of me looking after you, hasn’t it? Do it.’

Jack realised, staring between them all, that August couldn’t give up the Kingship. Whatever reason – stubbornness, something else, he couldn’t give it up. But his words to Ash – though they were delivered in that taunting, cruel tone – almost sounded like permission. And August stared at his brother now, as though no one else were in the room.

‘*Ash*,’ Gwyn commanded, and Ash blinked tears out of his eyes, stared at his brother, shaking his head.

‘La! Ash! Think of my sisters!’ Gulvi now, speaking for the first time, her voice a caustic burn that seethed in the room. ‘You *must*!’

‘Yes, brother,’ August said, calm, face ashen. ‘Hear them? You *must*.’

‘You fucking asshole,’ Ash said, but the words held no anger. He walked closer to August, and then stopped just out of arm’s reach, slipping a little on the ice.

‘Careful,’ August said, and Ash’s chest heaved. Gwyn walked closer, and Jack shifted to the side so that he could still keep an eye on the ice at August’s feet, keeping it frozen.

Gwyn looked at Pitch, who nodded once, taking a single step back.

It happened quickly. Ash forced his hands together and living shadows streamed out of his shaking palms towards August’s body. August gave a single, sharp cry and Jack couldn’t look, wouldn’t, knowing his own fear of the living darkness, knowing what it felt like, knowing how awful it was to have the shadows forced into unwilling flesh. He stared fixedly at the ice, focused on what he was supposed to do.

He saw Gulvi’s strong, booted feet step forwards and drag Ash out of the way. Heard Ash make a sound of protest, saw the struggle between the two of them as Gulvi dragged him back. And there was a beam of golden light to the left, where Pitch had sent it up to his axe-blades, ready for the surrender, ready to destroy the Nightmare Men that had invaded August.

Jack tried to close his mind to the noises of it, the forced possession and August fighting it. He wasn’t like Pitch, he hadn’t dreamed of revenge or imagined how sweet it would be. He only wanted August gone. He was sure Pitch was drinking up every moment of terror, but for himself, he wanted it over, and hearing the strangled, choked, horrified noises of someone who had tortured Jack, been tortured himself...

Jack just wanted it *done*.

August must have said something, because Jack heard Gwyn say:

‘What was that, August? Speak up.’

‘*DO IT!*’ August roared, voice echoing through the chamber.

At some wordless signal given from Gwyn, Pitch released the golden light and vanquished the living shadows, even as they tried to take over August. And August made a hitched sound of relief, sobbed, and then Jack looked up unwittingly to see Gwyn seize August by the throat with the hand wearing the ring, looking down on him with an empty expression on his face.

‘August Each Uisge, I – Gwyn ap Nudd – King of the Seelie Court and Kingdom, remove your Kingship and demote you to the status of underfae.’

August reached up and grasped Gwyn’s forearm, gasping, and the ground trembled again. For a single, terrified moment, Jack thought that August was trying to disappear again, but he was wrong. August’s magical abilities were draining out of him, flooding in green swirls out through his feet, his hands. Where the magic spilled on the floor, waterweed and reeds pushed up out of the ground, and cool, fresh water welled in puddles.

Ash was shouting something, but Jack couldn’t hear him, mind taken up with what he was seeing; water lilies and bog pimpernel springing up from the floor and flowering alongside marsh marigold and flowering rush, turning the cavern to an almost inviting wilderness.

August’s eyes rolled up back in his head, and he shuddered into unconsciousness. Gwyn didn’t let him go, but continued to hold him, power still spilling freely from August’s body and turning the chamber into a wetland. Ash was screaming now, and Jack started to realise what he was saying.

‘You’re killing him! You can’t drop a King down to underfae status like that! *You’ll kill him! You’re killing him!*’

Gwyn didn’t let go for another two minutes, and then he let go and stepped back, and August fell heavily to the ground.

‘Let me go!’ Ash was shouting, struggling with Gulvi. ‘Let-! *Gwyn!* You motherfucker, you’ve *killed him!*’

‘I have not,’ Gwyn said, turning and facing him. He waved an imperious hand at Gulvi, looking more like the King he was, than Jack had ever seen. ‘Let him check.’

Gulvi let go of Ash, who staggered forwards and slid down to August’s side, feeling for the pulse at his neck and pressing his fingers against it. He stilled and then tried to twist out of Gwyn’s grip as Gwyn grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him backwards. Gwyn shoved Ash at Gulvi, and Gulvi stepped forwards again, watching August’s still body with a black look on her face, one dagger already drawn.

‘You have your proof,’ Gwyn said.

‘He’s not well, he’s-’

‘He’s alive.’

Gwyn reached into his pocket and drew out a second charm, this one made of small interlinking rings of metal, as though chainmail had been cut into a diamond. He held it briefly, and three of his soldiers materialised in the room.

‘Take him back to the Seelie Court, put him in the dungeon.’

‘What?’ Ash said, staring. ‘What? He comes with us, to the Unseelie Court.’

‘He’s coming with us. He’s Seelie property. He goes into our dungeon. You get a Kingship out of this, Ash. I’d advise you to use it well and wisely.’

‘I had one condition. *One!*’ Ash struck out hard at Gulvi and she stared at him, wide-eyed, as he broke away from her. Rage stormed across his features, teeth bared. His eyes leapt with sparks. ‘This, *this bullshit*, was all based on a single condition, and you-’

‘You had *two*,’ Gwyn said, heartless. ‘The first, that he not be killed. I have honoured that. I owe you nothing else. I have practically handed you and Gulvi the Unseelie Kingdom on a silver platter. Remember that, when you rule it together.’

It was easy to forget that Ash was a waterhorse, that he wasn’t human. He dressed like a human – instead of wearing the period clothing that most of the other fae wore – he wore jeans and contemporary shirts, he wore Converse.

Jack startled when waterweed shot thick and pale green from Ash’s wrists, lashing towards Gwyn with a violent force. Ash stalked forwards, a deep, feral growl filling the chamber.

Gwyn had his sword up and out, it flashed twice, and the waterweed was cut before it could wrap around him. He stood calmly, facing Ash, cutting more coils of waterweed down until finally Ash was so close that Gwyn halted his progress by raising his sword and holding him at sword point.

‘You must have seen this coming,’ Gwyn said, a cruelty in his voice that sounded almost as calculating as Augustus. A small blossom of blood spilled, where the point of Gwyn’s sword had cut through Ash’s shirt into his flesh.

Ash stepped back, swayed, sank to the ground. Behind him, Gwyn’s soldiers walked over to Augustus and picked him up, a dead weight in their arms. Jack had been expecting Augustus to come back to life, to have some final riposte, but there was nothing. Augustus looked diminished somehow, and Jack wondered if the change in status had affected his appearance. He looked thinner, even frail.

The soldiers teleported out, following the magic of Gwyn’s charm. The chamber echoed Ash’s distressed breathing back at him. The green light from the torches flickered and danced over pondweed and marsh, reeds and flowering water plants.

Jack didn’t know what he expected. For someone to break the silence perhaps. For a sense of triumph to steal over him.

He felt numb, a sense of unreality spreading through him.

Ash looked up from the floor and stared at Pitch, a threat, a promise in his expression that was frightening. Ash didn’t see Pitch, Jack was sure. He saw the Nightmare King, saw the creature that had ruined his brother’s mind. Pitch didn’t say anything. Returned the gaze and then finally broke it to look at Gwyn, who was staring at the place where Augustus’ body had lain, expression wooden.

‘It is done,’ Gwyn said finally.

Without another word, he teleported away, light consuming him until it was just the four of them left. Pitch and Jack, Ash and Gulvi.

Jack wanted to say something to Ash. He wanted to say he knew what it was like to be a pawn. He knew what it was to save a sibling and pay a terrible price. But in the end he didn’t say anything at all, because he didn’t really know Ash at all, and because he didn’t think any words he had to offer

would be appreciated.

Besides, Pitch chose that moment to step forwards and wrap arms around Jack tightly, whisking them away into the dark, pulling them away from the chamber.

\*

They landed within the warded protection of the Workshop, outside in the snow. Jack felt dazed. He thought he'd feel relieved, or happy, or refreshed. He stared up at Pitch, and shook his head in disbelief.

'How can it be done?'

'Jack...'

'How can that be it?' Jack said, his voice sounding hoarse to his own ears. The jet stream had stripped at his throat, and anxiety had closed it up again. He realised he'd said nothing at all, not a single word, since leaving the Workshop. He'd not spoken to Augustus, he'd not spoken to Pitch...

He'd not said a thing for hours.

He cleared his throat and swallowed.

'We still have the shadows to deal with,' Pitch said, and Jack raised his eyebrows in agreement.

'But, Augustus is...'

'He's not invincible, Jack,' Pitch said, with a slight, sympathetic smile. 'No one is. Except, perhaps, the Nain Rouge at full power.'

Jack returned his tentative smile.

'And Makara, when you lie to him.'

Pitch nodded, and held a hand out to Jack. When Jack slid his fingers alongside Pitch's, he noticed that Pitch felt much warmer than usual. He realised his body temperature had dropped at some point, feeding all that ice towards Augustus, making sure he couldn't escape.

'Gwyn on a battlefield...' Pitch said, his smile widening.

They stared at each other, and Jack felt it. The first tiny curl of relief, a hesitant spiral of. He squeezed Pitch's hand, and on the heels of relief, exhaustion followed. He couldn't quite shake the heaviness he felt, the sadness. He thought of Ash on his knees, and realised that Augustus wasn't the only one who'd been defeated.

He stepped forward into Pitch's arms, pressed his head against Pitch's robe. He reached up with his hand and felt a heartbeat beneath fabric. Pitch placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, and they stood in the snow until the other Guardians came down to meet them, one by one, to ask if the war was over.

In our next chapter, 'It's Never Over,' Jack is dismayed to realise that his PTSD still persists and wants to know when it will end, and becomes paranoid that Augus will free himself. Pitch calls Gwyn back to the Workshop, to have him explain a few things to Jack.

# It's Never Over

## Chapter Notes

Ah folks, thank you so very much for all of your continued kudos, comments, subscriptions and bookmarks! It means so much to me. :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Two days passed.

Jack felt numb and bruised. It couldn't be over. That hadn't been like the epic battle he and the Guardians had against the Nightmare King the first time, with the cheering of happy children and snowball fights and a conquered evil.

It hadn't even been like the gymnasium, and that had ended terribly.

This was different.

Jack became increasingly paranoid that it couldn't be that simple. He jumped at shadows, suspected August lurked nearby. He avoided the other Guardians, and then avoided Pitch. He spent time in his own room, and when Pitch sought him out, looking at him with quiet understanding, Jack flew away.

He was still too scared to fly beyond the warded protection of the Workshop.

At the end of the second day, Jack flew down beneath the Workshop and hid in the tunnel leading to the reindeer. It was quiet and he couldn't hear the sounds of toys. He stared down either side of the tunnel, expecting August to appear. It didn't seem possible that the frail, unconscious person he'd seen in Gwyn's soldier's arms was August, and his mind was happy to jump to the conclusion that maybe it was a trick. A feint.

'Ah,' Pitch said, appearing in front of him, materialising out of the darkness. Jack stared, then forced himself to stand.

'I don't want to talk about it,' Jack said, and Pitch sighed.

'It's safe, Jack. I don't know how many times we can tell you, but-'

'You're all letting your guard down too quickly! Maybe he made plans! Maybe he was like the Nightmare King, and dumped boxes of *evil* everywhere. I don't know, I'm sure he's done *something*.'

'Gwyn will deal with that, if it happens. But, Jack, he was not in his right mind when he was defeated. Chances are it's been like that for some time. Please come back up to the Workshop. Or come with me to Kostroma, I could clean some more rooms.'

'He's gotten into the Workshop before. He could get in again.'

'He's in a Seelie dungeon,' Pitch said. 'This is paranoia, Jack. This isn't rational. You're tired, and you're working yourself into a state. Jack, it makes sense, given what happened to you, but-'

'No!' Jack shouted. And then winced when Pitch's eyes widened in shock.

Pitch didn't understand. If August *was* truly defeated, then he shouldn't be feeling like this anymore. If the war was over, then all the fears, the horribleness inside of him, it should be gone. And it wasn't gone. So maybe the war wasn't over.

'Jack,' Pitch said, his voice turning sympathy-soft. His face falling.

Jack hopped into the air and flew away before Pitch could say anything else.

\*

Pitch had been right about one thing, he was tired. He avoided everyone by flying around the outside of the Workshop, and crept into his own room through his window. He tried to pull down the blue and white fairy lights, but they seemed to have grown out of the very wall itself, and he couldn't. He didn't want cheer. He didn't want fun. Nothing was right, nothing was okay.

Sometimes, when his mind went blank, he saw Ash sitting broken on a cavern floor that was covered in pond and lake-flowers, and his chest hurt.

Jack curled up in the corner of his bed where it met the join of two walls. He kept his staff in his hands and kept an eye on the closed door, the window. The others didn't understand. For a battle to be that anticlimactic...something was going to have to go wrong.

Jack was ready.

He fell asleep sitting upright, his head drooping on his shoulder and his fingers clenched tightly around his staff.

It felt like no time passed at all before the nightmare found him, before it sunk claws into his skin and teeth into his body and dragged him into horror. He found himself underground again, in the cavern, but instead of Pitch showing up in time to break the compulsions, Pitch never showed up. Gwyn forgot about him.

And August realised that Jack couldn't discharge his power properly because there was too much of it, and instead wove his compulsions in another direction. '*Stop.*' '*Walk to me.*' '*Kneel.*'

Jack knew what was coming, he screamed.

Why did he ever trust Gwyn? Gwyn who wasn't trustworthy anyway? He should have known. And Pitch was gone, *again*, and August was the *only* constant in his mind, a reminder that-

'*Jack!*'

Pitch's hands grabbed at his flailing arms and he blinked awake even as he was dragged close to Pitch's body, even as Pitch wrapped his arms around Jack's back and made his hoodie snag on his scars. Jack cried out, whimpered over and over again, the nightmare leaving a sick, twisted sensation throughout him.

'Jack, it's *over*,' Pitch said. 'You're safe.'

'It can't be over. How can that be it? How can it be over? Why am I still like this then? Why?' Jack pushed himself away from Pitch and tore a hand through his own hair, gritting his teeth. 'I shouldn't be like this anymore! It should have worked!'

Pitch stared at him, and then his face twisted. He pressed fingers to his forehead.

‘It doesn’t work that way.’

‘Then how does it work?’ Jack shouted, knowing he was being irrational, hearing it in his voice.

‘Jack, these things resolve the way they need to. And you must know, you *must* be aware that spending three hundred years alone, with no support, not knowing how to ask for help; it makes you vulnerable to trauma, to...this. You’ve been alone for so long.’

Jack wrapped his arms around himself and then looked around for his staff, frantically, realising he must have dropped it in the night. Pitch both pointed out the staff where it lay on the bed, and reached out for Jack, taking him by the forearm and pulling him forwards.

‘It’s never over,’ Jack whispered, and Pitch murmured a soft, soothing sound as he pulled Jack against him. He carefully avoided Jack’s hair, but wrapped his arm around Jack’s back, a familiar, stable band of warmth.

‘You forgot the snowflake that Sandy made for you,’ Pitch said. ‘He will *help* you.’

‘I don’t want to be all calm and sure that things are going to be okay. Things haven’t been okay, and Augus will escape, he *will*. You all talk about how powerful he is, and then act like after his defeat, it’s all over, and how am I meant to believe that? *How?*’

‘I’m going to contact Gwyn. I think you need to talk to him about this.’

‘What? *No*. I don’t want to see him,’ Jack said, stubbornness settling down in his gut, and Pitch sighed.

‘I think you need to understand some things about the fae Court, and the likelihood of Augus escaping now that he’s been captured. You need to hear that from him. Jack, I’m concerned that if we don’t do something about this now, it will become a wedge in your recovery.’

Jack opened his mouth to argue, and then realised abruptly that Pitch was right. He was spinning out of control. He didn’t want to see Gwyn, because Gwyn had a habit of seeming not that bad when it was just the two of them, and being *monstrous* around other people. But he needed to talk to him.

‘I’ll do it,’ Jack said, finally. ‘If one of us is going to blow that stupid horn, it should be me.’

Jack let go of his staff again, realising he was clutching it to himself like it was a security blanket. He brushed ice crystals off his hand. He could no longer hide his emotional lability. As soon as he began to feel distressed, the ice responded.

‘I guess I have been kind of losing it lately.’

‘Your flare for understatement has not gone unnoticed,’ Pitch murmured, and then pulled Jack close again, kissing him lightly on the lips. It was too quick to freak Jack out, and enough contact to make Jack feel grounded. ‘It’s understandable. It was difficult for me too.’

Jack looked at him, and Pitch nodded at his silent question.

‘I was ready to bury my axe in him. Especially seeing you compelled once more. But there were many people afraid in that room, Jack. Not just you. I have only ever enjoyed feeling or seeing certain types and colours of fear. War changes you. You expect, sometimes, to feel triumphant



when you win, and certainly that *does* happen. It happened every time I conquered the shadows, for they are evil, and have only ever been evil. They do not have family members or other people who can be hurt in the bargain. This sort of war, the war between humans and humans, the war between fae and fae, it is dirty work.'

'I thought I'd feel good, after,' Jack said, and then winced. 'I'm pretty naïve, huh?'

'No,' Pitch said, soft. 'But please, *talk* to Gwyn. So that we might put our minds to fixing Kostroma, defeating the rest of the shadows.'

Jack stared at him. He'd forgotten. He'd been so concerned about things going wrong with August escaping and getting free again, he'd completely forgotten.

Pitch laughed.

'Wow, I went down the rabbit hole a bit there, yeah?' Jack said.

'I wouldn't phrase it that way around Bunnymund, if I were you,' Pitch said. 'But...yes. Also, you should see the other Guardians at some point. They've been worried for you. But, as that is what they *usually* do, you could probably avoid them even longer, if you wanted to.'

Pitch grinned at him, and Jack rolled his eyes.

\*

When Gwyn arrived, teleporting into the round table room, he looked just as tired as he had before. His clothes were neater, but otherwise he looked ragged. Jack couldn't see him without thinking about how he'd treated Ash. Without seeing Ash kneeling on the floor, and Gulvi standing nearby, helpless, as Pitch had teleported Jack out of the cavern.

They watched each other for a long moment. When Jack didn't say anything, Gwyn reached out and took the horn from Jack's fingers. He put it down on the table by his side.

'Are you taking it back?' Jack said, and Gwyn nodded.

'The ward as well. It no longer needs to be in place. The Kostroma ward can come down also.'

'But...'

Gwyn watched Jack for a long time, and then sighed, his shoulders fell.

'You have questions. Come with me while I take down the ward.'

Gwyn gestured for Jack to lead the way. The yeti practically fell over themselves, getting out of Gwyn's way. They showed him a deference that they usually only reserved for North.

Gwyn struck out alongside the perimeter of the building, for several minutes. He paused, looked down, and then dug into a layer of frost and snow, picking up a small, insignificant looking rock. He turned it in his fingers, and then clutched it in his fist, closing his eyes briefly.

In response to that minor gesture, the ward around the Workshop suddenly flashed a pale cream, and then disappeared in a blaze of light.

'Just like that, huh?' Jack said, and Gwyn pocketed the small rock and nodded. 'But what about the messenger network? Or Ash? Or-'

‘Ash?’ Gwyn said, confused.

‘You didn’t see the way he looked at Pitch, and you-’

‘Ash has his hands full with the Unseelie Court. As for the messenger network; they’ve disbanded. Gulvi promised them all increased status in exchange for their loyalty. The Dullahan left August Court some time ago, and there’s no one else left, since August himself removed the Nain Rouge from his Court, and Greenteeth left herself.’

‘I bet he’s already tried to escape,’ Jack said, floating alongside Gwyn as they made their way out past the training arena, past the invisible barrier where the ward had once existed. Jack felt his heart beat faster, passing it.

‘He’s still unconscious,’ Gwyn said, and Jack stared at him.

‘What?’

It had been five days. That was a long time for anyone to be unconscious.

‘He’s still unconscious,’ Gwyn repeated, and then pursed his lips. ‘Dropping down from King status to underfae like that...it could have killed him. He’ll likely be unconscious for at least another week.’

Jack stared at him in shock. He’d been imagining August somewhere, plotting an escape, or already free. It had never occurred to him that August might still be unconscious. Then he realised something else, and he frowned.

‘Were you *trying* to kill him?’ Jack said, and Gwyn stumbled.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, emphatically. ‘No. I can see how you might come to that conclusion, but no. He is exceptionally powerful; I knew he’d survive the drop.’

Gwyn walked on in silence, and Jack followed behind, small breezes keeping him airborne. Jack looked behind him, realised this was the furthest he’d travelled from the Workshop in some time. He’d fled from the Workshop since the wards were constructed, but he hadn’t casually left it like this in months. He felt it like a pressure in his chest, in the fluttering of his heart.

‘I think I know why I’m here,’ Gwyn said finally. He stopped by an outcropping of snow and rock, and faced Jack squarely, face grim. ‘In both Courts, there is a dungeon. The dungeon is keyed to the energy signature of the King or Queen, and sometimes, his Inner Court. It is inescapable, the only person who can release the prisoner is the King or Queen. This is not human incarceration, Jack. August has been defeated. That means something to the fae. His Court is shattered. The Unseelie fae want to rebuild and look forward to the future. It is over.’

Jack’s heart burnt with the question he asked next.

‘Did you know you’d destroy him like that? Ash? Did it feel good?’

Gwyn’s eyes widened. For a moment, he looked truly shocked, and then he averted his gaze.

‘Is he okay?’ Jack added.

When Gwyn looked at him again, a muscle was jumping in his jaw.

‘What do you want, Jack?’ Gwyn said, voice hard. ‘Do you want to be a part of our world?’

Because I can arrange that for you. You can visit the Seelie Court more often, embrace that part of you that is inherently fae. You could even seek out Ash, if you liked. You could ask him how he felt, and perhaps he'd even care that a minor frost spirit like yourself was concerned with his welfare. Is that what you want?"

Jack stared at him, speechless.

'I can't decide,' Jack said finally, 'if this is who you are all the time, or if this is who you became because of the war. You weren't like this at all when we climbed the mountain together. Remember when you said you were going to help me build my home?'

Gwyn scratched at the back of his neck. His gaze drifted, and Jack watched as it looked like he blanked out entirely. When Gwyn blinked himself back into awareness, nearly an entire minute had passed. Something about his gaze had softened, he looked around again, and Jack was reminded of how he'd checked around him warily when Jack had asked him about his parents.

'I can still help you build your home,' Gwyn said, his voice quieter. 'I made something for you.'

He reached into his pocket and drew out short, thin rod of blue metal. He handed it over to Jack, and Jack turned it in his hands. It was cold, simple. He had no idea what it was for. He looked up, confused.

'The magic on it will last a year and a day,' Gwyn said. 'I cannot have you call the horn to contact me, but you can use this. It's charmed to respond only to you, and please do not- Please do not abuse it. I do not like- I have never appreciated being at the beck and call of others. But I did think, some time ago, that after this was all over, you might still appreciate some assistance with navigating the otherworlds and learning how to bend your energy into a home. And as I cannot visit every day any longer, I thought this might be of assistance.'

Gwyn sounded like he had that night in the cave, after his nightmare. Uncertain but honest, and Jack narrowed his eyes at him. He had no idea what to make of Gwyn anymore.

Jack looked down at the charm. He couldn't help but be aware of what a big deal it was that Gwyn had given it to him.

'How do I use it?' Jack said.

'You hold it in your left fist and think a message to me. If I am free, I will attend as soon as possible. If I am not...try again later.'

Jack placed the metal in his left hand and then closed his fingers around it. He thought:

*You're kind of a douche sometimes.*

Gwyn's eyes widened comically, and then he laughed under his breath.

'It works,' Gwyn said, and then smiled sadly down at the charm itself. 'So, are you ready to make your home? I have to think that you bringing it up is a good sign. And you are immensely powerful, I think you're ready.'

'I...need some time to think about it,' Jack said. He had no idea where or what he was going to make. It was supposed to be something he could live in, like the Workshop, or Bunnymund's warren, but the only place he really wanted to live was Kostroma.

Still, he thought it might be good to have a place of his own, and what if things between he and

Pitch didn't work out? Jack winced.

'So, other news?' Jack said, and he felt almost like it was old times, when Pitch was the Nightmare King and he and Gwyn had talked every day that Jack wasn't sleeping about the Court, about plans and strategies.

'Gulvi and Ash are on track to becoming co-Queen and King of the Unseelie Court. Gulvi will get voted in first, and then she will nominate Ash to stand beside her. Ash is not well suited to Kingship, but he is a good public figure. Gulvi is chaotic and abrasive, but also intelligent and strategic. She cares for the Kingdom. The Unseelie fae – many of them – know that she intervened directly to help bring down Augus. Favour has swung strongly in her direction.'

'You've been angling for this for a while, haven't you?' Jack said, and Gwyn nodded.

'Saving a Kingdom is not only in the defeat of a villain, but in assuring that the Kingdom is in a position of recovery afterwards. If I only defeated Augus and closed myself off to the recovery of the Unseelie Kingdom, I'd be nothing more than a General.'

'I can't believe you think Gulvi would make a good Queen,' Jack said, and Gwyn smiled.

'Can you not? She is intelligent, wily, and she trusts me to know what is best. It will allow me reach over both Kingdoms until things are stable. She will grow into the role well. And Ash will stabilise her wilder nature, as he always has.'

'Will Ash try and get revenge?' Jack said, and Gwyn shook his head, frowning.

'I cannot see that happening, knowing what I know of him.'

Gwyn sounded certain. It occurred to Jack that if it was over, he'd never need to be manipulated by Gwyn again. Never be lured into some evil plan. He'd never need to experience a compulsion again. He'd never need to have anything to do with battle tactics and strange missions where he walked up a mountain while a sword etched a wound into his back. It was hard to imagine.

'It really is over?' Jack said, staring at him.

'Pitch must still destroy the living shadows that are remaining,' Gwyn said speculatively. 'And if you require assistance with that, let me know. But, otherwise, yes.'

If it was really over...

'You gave me a choice,' Jack said slowly. 'Just then. To be involved in the fae world more, or to...step out of it. I'm...I'm going to stay in touch with you, because you've helped me a lot, even if you are kind of horrible. But I think I'm done with the fae, aside from like chance meetings and stuff, alright? I can have that, can't I? Because it's over?'

For a long moment, Gwyn looked like he wanted to talk Jack out of it. His forehead creased, his eyebrows pulled together. But then, after a long moment, Gwyn's face smoothed out and he offered Jack a smile that spoke of ancient hurts.

'I believe that is the wisest choice. It's the same choice I'd make, if I weren't fae myself.'

\*

Jack stayed out beyond the wards after Gwyn left. He walked a little further and stopped. He swore he could still feel eyes on him, but he wondered now how much of that was paranoia. He looked

around, curiously.

He could sleep in tree boughs again.

He could fly on the winds with Mora and not have to worry for her safety.

He could ride Mora, like Sandy and North had suggested.

He could tumble on the winds anywhere he wanted, just 'because'; not as a way of fleeing someone or racing towards something else.

It didn't seem real.

He turned when he heard the sound of footsteps, saw Pitch approaching. Pitch had his axe in hand, a wary look on his face as he, too, surveyed his surroundings. Despite Pitch's assurances that everything was over, it would take some time to get used to their freedom.

It hadn't occurred to Jack until now, how valuable freedom was, how much it mattered to him. He'd been trapped in circumstance and North's Workshop and now...

'Hey, it helped,' Jack said, 'So I guess you give good advice sometimes, for a guy that used to harbour the world's most terrible evil.'

'Well, you know what they say, Jack. What doesn't kill you only makes you wish you'd died. Wait, no, that's not it...'

Jack laughed. Jack's humour had always bent towards the dark, the mischievous. And Pitch's natural levity was reassuring.

'I have two things in mind for this afternoon,' Pitch said and Jack's heart started thumping faster. He couldn't help it. It had been so long since Pitch had even really flirted with him, and he doubted Pitch was doing it now, not when he'd been so gentle, so cautious. Not when Jack still flashbaked suddenly at unpredictable times.

But Jack's heart had other ideas...

'First, I wish to go to Kostroma and heal more of it. And second, I would like you to go out flying while I do so. It's been a long time since you've been able to do it, and it might be frightening at first...but-'

'Yeah,' Jack said, 'yeah, but I want to.'

Pitch extended his hand towards Jack, and Jack walked forwards. He tensed, as he so often did these days before skin to skin contact, but he offered a game smile to Pitch and slid his palm into Pitch's hand. He wanted to explore the forest over Galich, Kostroma. It had been a long time since he'd explored any sort of forest at all.

\*

The ward was already down when they arrived, and Jack supposed that Gwyn had visited immediately after leaving the Workshop. He had a moment of apprehension, wondering if that meant any remaining shadows could simply swarm out of the house and hurt them. But it was daylight, and Jack remembered how competent Pitch was. Jack closed his eyes, trying to remember that not everything was a reason for panic, not everything was a disaster in waiting.

‘Wow, I got really used to things going wrong,’ Jack said, and Pitch touched his arm, reassuringly.

‘We all did,’ Pitch said. ‘But you needn’t fear. There are no shadows in that house. I can tell.’

‘From here?’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded absently, looking towards the house. Then he looked up at the sky.

‘Shouldn’t you be up there? Creating some sort of mess of snow and ice?’

Jack followed his. A gust of air wrapped around his whole body and pushed him forwards, a shove of playfulness. Jack laughed, unbidden.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘Yeah!’

He shot upwards without another word, the wind curling around him in excited bursts and whirls, whipping at his clothes. He looked back, saw Pitch watching him, felt a flash of anxiety. What if he was doing the wrong thing? What if it was too soon? But then Pitch waved at him, and Jack pulled conscious, rational thought forward. Augus was still unconscious. The messenger network was disbanded. Ash was in the Unseelie Court. And Jack...

Jack was *powerful*.

He spun in the air and shot off over the forest, snow and ice following him as he went, crisping the leaves and covering tree canopies with a thin dusting of snow. He turned constantly, checking to see if anyone was following him, but the more he flew, the more he realised that he was alone and free in the sky, nothing but the enthusiastic wind around him, snow and frost falling from his staff and fingertips.

He sent a flurry of snow to a picturesque grove of trees, then stared at his own hand, turning on his back in the air to examine it. Instead of bluish, jagged ice shards, there was a thin layer of tiny, clear ice crystals coating his fingers and his hand, all the way up to his forearm – he could feel it under his hoodie. The ice crystals caught the light and reflected it at him, diamond bright.

After a moment he realised the ice crystals were in his hair, had made a thin layer over his cheeks. He rubbed at them, they grew back.

‘Minor frost spirit, my ass, *Gwyn*,’ Jack said, staring at how easily he made the frost now. He didn’t even need to think about it, and there it was. He smiled, he kind of liked it. A feral wildness stole over him, very like what he’d felt at the Wild Hunt, and he whooped in excitement.

It was fun, Jack realised. He grinned at the forest around him and whooped again.

\*

He came back two hours later, shaking frost particles out of his hair and scraping it off his hands, a snowy, frost-filled forest behind him. At one point he’d passed a herd of deer and iced the antlers on the heads of the bucks and the old stag. They’d lowed at him angrily, and he’d laughed before flying back to Pitch’s home. He iced the windows as he flew up, and then saw that Pitch had left the giant, glass sliding door ajar for him, and sailed through it.

He landed on his feet lightly, blinked to see Pitch asleep on his bed. Jack paused, placed his staff next to Pitch’s axe where it leaned against the wall. The repairing magic must have made him tired again.

Jack crawled onto the bed in front of him and was about to lie down, when Pitch opened his eyes a

little, a sliver of gold peeking out from beneath his eyelids. He yawned.

‘You smell like winter,’ Pitch said, and Jack touched his face lightly with his fingers.

‘You’re really bad at poetry.’

‘That wasn’t poetry, and I am *not*,’ Pitch said, and Jack smiled, filled with a rush of affection.

Jack leaned down and kissed his cheek, lips almost burning at the warmth. It seemed normal now, how much his body temperature dropped while he was making his ice. But it made the contrast between his cold skin and Pitch’s heat all the more noticeable. He dragged his lips down and Pitch tilted his head up, and Jack had only meant to kiss him chastely, had only meant to drag closed lips against Pitch’s, but Pitch reached up and wrapped an arm around Jack’s shoulder and dragged him down, licking his way into Jack’s closed mouth with an easy, sleepy confidence.

Beneath a small, flutter of fear, Jack shivered with want. He opened his mouth to the heat of it, and Pitch obliged his hunger, pulling Jack closer and rolling so that Jack was pinned beneath him, Pitch between his legs. Jack’s breath hitched, he slid his hands underneath Pitch’s robes and pressed his palms to Pitch’s skin, hesitantly. There was so much warmth; it felt jarring after being outside for so long.

Pitch kissed his way underneath Jack’s jaw, bit a wet mark into the side of his neck, soothing it with licks as he continued his way across the scar that the Nain Rouge had forged into him, and down further, tugging his hoodie aside so that he could mouth at Jack’s collarbone.

‘Oh god,’ Jack said, dazed. Pitch had been tentative for so long, it had been a long time since he’d felt this overwhelmed, this quickly. He’d missed that confidence. He arched up into Pitch, then stilled.

He didn’t know what he could handle, he wasn’t sure he was ready to be penetrated by Pitch yet. Close but...perhaps not yet.

‘I don’t know what we can do,’ Jack whispered, and Pitch wrapped his hands around Jack’s torso, spanning his ribs with his fingers. With an unerring aim, Pitch pressed down slightly over the bite mark scar that August had left him, and Jack froze.

‘*Pitch*,’ Jack warned, and Pitch breathed out a frustrated breath through his nostrils. He eased up on the pressure automatically.

‘I *like* doing that,’ Pitch said, voice deeper, and Jack shivered.

‘Yeah, but, let’s just avoid the crippling flashbacks for now, huh?’

Pitch lowered his forehead to Jack’s shoulder and nodded.

‘There is a line,’ Pitch whispered, ‘before your fear tips into terror, before it is anything more than startled discomfort and *oh*, if you would let me, I would see how you could drift upon that line, and for how long.’

Jack squeezed his eyes shut. He cut off the moan that leapt in his throat.

‘I was thinking,’ Pitch said softly, tone abruptly changing from darkly seductive to sympathetic with a suddenness that felt a little like whiplash, ‘about what we could do. And while I am happy to move over old ground, I was thinking we could try something new. Something you might enjoy.’

'I'm listening,' Jack said, and Pitch smiled against his bared shoulder.

'I was thinking...' Pitch slid his hand down Jack's body and ghosted over his half-hard cock lightly, the touch barely more than a whisper. Jack swallowed. 'You could put *this* in *me*, for a change.'

Jack's eyes flew open, he groaned as Pitch pressed his palm down, pressing the fabric of Jack's pants into his half-hard cock. He shifted his legs, restless, and Pitch licked his way back up Jack's neck once more. He ended up face to face with Jack, staring down at him.

'It's different,' Jack said, uncertain.

'It's not like you,' Pitch said, in agreement. 'And I don't think it's something we would get used to, but I would like to. I can guide you through it. Even if you're the one on top, I think we know that you like me in charge.'

'I really do,' Jack said, without even thinking about it. It was worth it to see the way Pitch's pupils dilated in response.

'This gives you more control,' Pitch whispered, leaning down and pushing his breath into Jack's ear. He ground the heel of his palm down into Jack's hardness so that it was almost painful, and Jack's breath gusted out of him roughly. 'Do you want to try?'

Jack found it hard to think about anything, and eventually had to move his hand down to Pitch's wrist, stilling its persistent, convincing movements against him.

'Uh, maybe?'

Pitch pressed his mouth over Jack's and kissed him again, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth and biting down, scraping the still slightly jagged edges of his teeth over the inside of his lip. Jack made a small sound, dug his fingers into Pitch's robes, and only let go when Pitch leaned up and away from him, disrobing on the bed. Pitch looked at Jack's clothing meaningfully, and Jack realised that Pitch wanted him to strip.

'What about the scars?' Jack said, and then winced. 'It's stupid. You've already seen them...'

Pitch stopped, concerned.

'Jack, just because we've made progress in that area once, doesn't mean you'll always feel the same way about it. In five years, you may wish me not to see them again, and we will deal with that as it happens. Do you want me to not see your scars?'

Jack stared at Pitch, a little taken aback. He hadn't expected Pitch to be so understanding. It hadn't occurred to him that he could change his mind, that he could just decide one day that he wasn't okay with it again. It seemed entirely reasonable now that Pitch had said it out loud, but until he'd heard the words, he'd felt that once Pitch had seen them, Jack would be obligated to feel okay about him seeing them every time afterwards as well.

Hearing that Pitch didn't expect it was a weight off his shoulders. He grasped the hem of his hoodie and drew it up over his head. He bit his lip nervously as he dropped the sweatshirt off the edge of the bed, and his hand came up automatically to curl over the bite mark.

After a minute, he took a deep breath, removed his hand. Pitch glanced down at the scar, then back up at Jack. Pitch stripped fully after that, and Jack knelt up on his shins so that he could remove his pants properly. Being naked on Pitch's bed was familiar. And Jack clung onto that, because



everything else made him a little uneasy.

Pitch crawled over to him, pushed Jack back into pillows with one hand on his sternum. He drew a single, centring line down Jack's chest, and Jack breathed deeply in response to it. That was definitely familiar. He wished Pitch would do that every day.

'I thought you were sleepy,' Jack said, and Pitch smirked at him, a lazy expression.

'I am. How about a nightcap?'

'Oh god,' Jack said, rolling his eyes. 'Don't even think that was funny, you are *not*-'

Jack's back arched once more, his breath hitched on a cry as Pitch took his cock in his warm hand, stroking it twice, before simply holding it. Jack shivered underneath him, was digging fingernails into Pitch's shoulders and couldn't remember lifting his arms. He stared up at Pitch in shock, and then his eyebrows drew together when Pitch didn't move his hand at all.

'What are you doing?' Jack said, and Pitch kissed him with closed lips, sweetly.

'Warming you up.'

'Oh,' Jack said, and then realisation struck him. '*Oh.*'

It was working, too. Pitch's hand was a brand of heat against him, warming him through. Jack stared up at Pitch and then had to look away, affected by the intimacy of it. Pitch was just...*holding* him, looking down at him.

'You're doing so well,' Pitch said quietly, and Jack swallowed down a whimper. *Praise*. Pitch knew exactly what it did to him. It had been so long since he'd said something like that, in a context like this. He felt fractured by it.

'I'm not doing much,' Jack replied, and Pitch laughed under his breath and then bent down and licked the curve of his ear, pushed his tongue inside. Jack gasped, hoarse, and Pitch chuckled.

Heat clung, curled through him, and Pitch eased his hand off Jack's cock slowly and then leaned towards one side of the bed, opening a drawer and bringing out lubricant. He slicked up his fingers, and Jack watched him curiously.

First, Pitch slid his hand over to Jack's right hand, and stroked lubricant across his fingers with his own, until the contact was wet and almost obscene, and Jack's breathing became heavier when he realised what Pitch was doing, what he was getting Jack ready to *do*.

Then Pitch reached between them both and wrapped his palm around Jack's cock. He trailed fingers up over the head of him and swirled until most of the lubricant was off his hand. Jack found it hard to concentrate, holding his slick hand up off the bed and realising that they were doing this, it was actually going to happen. He started to worry about logistics, and Pitch must have caught a hint of his fears, because he laughed deep in his chest.

Pitch reached up with his hand, tangled his fingers in Jack's again, drew him upright.

'Still good?' Pitch said, and Jack looked at his own wet fingers, flushed.

'I feel ridiculous,' Jack said, and Pitch smirked.

'Whatever for?'

‘I’m...I’m the size of- I’m so short compared to you. You’re like this big jungle cat, and I’m...’

Pitch captured Jack’s mouth with his own, thrust his tongue so deep that Jack’s groan was wrenched deep from his throat. He swayed where he knelt and Pitch steadied him with his other hand.

‘Let me assure you, height is only a problem if you let it be one.’

Pitch ended the kiss by licking at Jack’s lips sensually, and then he kneeled in a very similar position to Jack alongside him, before resting his ass on his ankles and lowering his chest to the bed gracefully. He reached an arm out and grasped Jack’s forearm, pulling him around and behind him, and Jack went, unable to get the burning cold out of his cheeks or his neck, unable to believe that this was about to happen.

‘Are you sure?’ Jack said, as he placed his dry hand on Pitch’s back, uncertain. Pitch turned his head so he could look at Jack properly. There was a certainty in his gaze, and Jack looked down at the expanse of dark skin before him, at the faint bumps of Pitch’s spine, at the crests of ribs he could see. He trailed his fingers down them, and frost followed. Pitch took a deep, ragged breath.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said, ‘Should I-’

‘It’s fine, Jack,’ Pitch said, a warmth in his voice that was more sure than his expression.

Jack touched Pitch some more, finding the paler lines of scars with his hands. He trailed his fingers over one particularly long scar, followed the shape with his index finger. Pitch made a small, deep sound that vibrated through his body.

Jack had asked Pitch to guide him through it, but he realised, as his fingers found his way to another scar, that he didn’t really need that, despite not having done this before. Pitch had given him a roadmap of sorts, in the very gentle ways he had treated Jack’s body those first few times.

He smoothed the palm of his hand down Pitch’s ass, as he mapped his back with his other hand, and Pitch shifted slightly, bowed the curve of his spine.

Jack wanted to ask if Pitch was sure again, but he knew that he was. Jack was the one who wasn’t entirely certain. Not yet. But Pitch had said that it was a way of getting intimacy without completely overwhelming Jack. And Jack wanted the intimacy, and he wanted to know Pitch in this way, at least once.

He touched his fingers to the warmth of Pitch’s entrance, and exhaled slowly. The temperature difference was more noticeable, his hand was going to warm up. He couldn’t take too long, because heat was already drifting away from his cock.

Jack lowered his mouth to Pitch’s spine and licked along it, tasting the faintest hint of salt from the effort it must have taken to use the repairing magic. At the same time, he pressed the tip of his index finger into Pitch, sliding slowly into heat and tightness. Both of them gasped at the same time.

Jack focused, made sure that his frost was under control. He smoothed his hand across Pitch’s ribs, as Pitch had done to him in the past. He sucked at the bump of one of Pitch’s vertebrae, swirling his tongue around it and pressing deeper with his finger.

‘Like this?’ Jack said, and Pitch hummed in approval. Jack rested his forehead against Pitch’s back, wondered what that heat would feel like around his cock.

Pitch was mostly silent as Jack slowly moved his finger back and forth. He sighed when Jack pressed back in with two, stretching him gently. He began to crave the small shifts in Pitch's breathing, the way it would hitch when Jack brushed over his prostate, or the way he would empty his lungs of air when Jack would stretch him or when Jack pressed as deep as he could go. He held out for sharper inhales, gooseflesh rippling across Pitch's skin, the way he pressed fingers into the bedspread, holding on.

'Now, Jack,' Pitch said thickly, his voice a command despite their positions.

Jack paused, then withdrew his fingers slowly, his hand warm. He shifted his position and realised that Pitch had laid down in a way that made everything easier, more accessible. And with Pitch bowed flat over his knees like this, the height difference was less noticeable. Jack trailed his hand down Pitch's forearm, and Pitch responded by reaching back immediately, interlacing his fingers with Jack's.

'Grasp yourself with your other hand,' Pitch ordered.

Jack shuddered and did so, the warmth of his own palm and fingers paling into comparison to the heat that he knew awaited him.

'Stroke yourself for me, Jack,' Pitch breathed. 'Just a few times.'

Jack hesitated, aware that he was already close. They hadn't done anything like this in so long, and the anticipation set his nerves alight. But he didn't like to disobey, he wanted to make Pitch happy, so he moved his fingers along himself several times.

The cry he made shattered around them, and Pitch squeezed at his hand reassuringly.

'You realise I'm not gonna last, right?' Jack laughed, helplessly, as he lined himself up against Pitch and thought his heart might beat all the way out of his throat.

Pitch pushed back before Jack even had a chance to move forwards, and Jack made a high-pitched sound as the head of his cock sank in. Jack bowed forwards immediately, bracing himself with his other hand on Pitch's back.

'Oh god,' Jack breathed. 'Hang on a minute.'

'More,' Pitch said, though there was a smile in his voice, as though he knew exactly what the heat was doing to Jack. 'Now.'

*'Pitch...'*

Pitch untangled his fingers from Jack's and curved his hand around Jack's arm, all the way up until he could encourage Jack to move forwards, pushing back at the same time. Jack sank deeper without having really done anything at all, and Jack choked out a sound, overwhelmed with heat and sensation, tightness and friction.

He tried to be slow, but Jack pushed forwards without thinking, wanting, amazed at what he was doing. And as Jack pressed himself all the way home, Pitch shuddered beneath him and moaned low, dragged his hand back down Jack's arm and gripped his fingers so tightly it hurt.

Jack withdrew, pressed forwards again, and his mouth dropped open. Tiny particles of frost spilled out at his harsh exhale. Frost spirals curled from the other hand resting on Pitch's back, and Pitch groaned as though he liked it.

‘This okay?’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded. ‘You’re really pretty like this.’

It was true, the way the curlicues of frost were finding their way up Pitch’s spine and down over his hip. The way they frosted out leaves like ferns. Pitch gasped a broken laugh beneath him, pushing his hips back into Jack and forcing the breath out of his lungs.

‘No one in the bedroom has ever called me pretty before.’

‘Then they’re all morons. You’re the prettiest,’ Jack said, a mischievous smile creeping into his voice.

Pitch growled, moved his hips back roughly, forcing Jack into a faster rhythm. Jack gasped, distracted, his body undulating in time with Pitch’s, head dropping into the frost on Pitch’s back and disturbing it. Jack slid his hand down, held onto Pitch’s hip for better leverage and pushed in harder, and they both moaned at the same time.

Jack squeezed Pitch’s hand and thrust harder, and Pitch responded, breath hitching. He pushed his head to the side and Jack saw that his eyes were closed, his eyebrows knitted together. His mouth was open too, and Jack could hear the raggedness of his breathing. It was all a hot coil inside him, Pitch’s body warming his, turning him into a knot of sensation.

*Oh crap, I’m really not going to last.*

‘Pitch,’ Jack warned, and Pitch opened his eyes, slid that golden gaze up to Jack’s.

‘Come,’ Pitch said, voice thick, command lacing its way through his voice. ‘Do it.’

Jack’s hips stuttered to a stop as he pressed himself as deep as he could, shaking as came, Pitch’s voice pushing him over the edge. Pitch hissed at the coldness of it, pushed back, stroked his fingers across Jack’s fingers, arching his shoulders up into Jack’s forehead. Jack gasped through the intensity of it. He couldn’t believe he was inside Pitch, how good it felt, and the knowledge of what they’d just done extended the spasm of his hips, increased the tremors in his legs.

*Oh god.*

‘My turn,’ Pitch said minutes later, as Jack softened inside of him, sliding forwards easily so that Jack slipped out. He turned around quickly, pushing a weak Jack back to the mattress. Jack stared up at him, spent and wide-eyed, and Pitch smirked, an old darkness chasing across his face.

‘Tell me if you need me to stop,’ Pitch said, wrapping a hand around himself where he straddled Jack’s legs, and pulling himself off with rough strokes, the head of his cock glistening with precome.

Jack’s eyes widened even further when he realised what Pitch was doing. What he was going to do.

‘Oh my god,’ Jack breathed.

Pitch’s smirk widened, and he bent over Jack, sliding his tongue deep, moving it back and forth in a way that reminded Jack in no uncertain terms of what they’d just done.

Jack wanted to know what it would feel like, wanted it more than he knew was possible. He pulled back from Pitch’s mouth, sliding his tongue along Pitch’s and then moaned.

‘Please,’ Jack said, voice breaking. ‘Please.’

'Jack,' Pitch groaned, as though he couldn't quite believe his luck, as though Jack was a wonder. And Jack gasped as Pitch tensed above him, then cried out in a mixture of shock and surprise and pleasure when he felt the first hot stripe of Pitch's come against his torso.

*Yours, yours, yours, yours.*

The mantra in his head didn't stop, and he heard himself murmuring the word twice before Pitch caught Jack's lips in a kiss so rough that Jack cut the inside of his mouth on his front teeth.

Pitch licked at the taste of blood on the inside of Jack's mouth, and Jack tensed. He pushed Pitch backwards just as Pitch shuddered through the last of his orgasm.

'Wait,' Jack said, 'Sorry, just...'

'It's fine, it's fine,' Pitch said roughly, dropping his head to Jack's side and breathing out a wrecked exhale, trembling. 'It's fine.'

'Sorry,' Jack whispered. It was the taste of his own blood in his mouth, Pitch being so close. Jack made a noise of frustration and Pitch rubbed a slow, grounding circle into his chest.

'I didn't mean-'

'We got this far, didn't we?' Pitch said, voice smooth. 'Look how far we got, Jack. You did wonderfully.'

Jack was still uncertain, and Pitch kissed the curve of his shoulder gently, each brush of his lips a lingering sign of care. Jack tried to hang onto his sense that he'd done the wrong thing, that he'd ruined it, but it was hard to keep sight of that with Pitch pressing those tender, delicate kisses to his shoulder.

'Oh,' Jack breathed, tangling his hands in Pitch's hair.

Pitch hummed a rich, warm sound of acknowledgement, and then licked a steady stripe up the side of Jack's neck.

'Stay with me,' Pitch said. 'Stay, tonight. Tomorrow the real world awaits, and we must defeat more of those shadows. But stay here, with me.'

'I don't know,' Jack said, suddenly worried. 'I just...'

After all this time desperate to escape the Workshop, Jack wasn't sure if he was ready yet. Pitch sighed and rolled over so that he was lying alongside Jack, an arm across Jack's belly and hands trailing with an intimate familiarity in the come that had landed on Jack's torso. He spread it with his fingers, rubbed it in, and Jack groaned.

'It's hard to be disappointed, Jack, when I have you here like this.'

Jack looked up at the exposed beams of the ceiling, and then turned into Pitch's body, tucking his head between his shoulder and his neck. He could still taste blood in his mouth. He wished it didn't remind him of anything else except the deliciousness of the kiss that had caused the bleeding in the first place.

'I will stay eventually,' Jack whispered.

'I know you will,' Pitch said with a faith that was so disarming, Jack couldn't help but rise up on

his arm and kiss him on the lips; a closed-mouth benediction.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'The Engineer,' Jack finally gets to ride Mora, Gwyn visits Pitch with an unusual offer and Pitch and Jack travel to a deserted airplane hangar, where Pitch tells the story of a certain sword, and a Nightmare King once built giant metal robots to protect the shadows from the sun...

# The Engineer

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Returning to the Workshop wasn't quite as bad this time, knowing that they could leave again. Jack was still easily startled, and he wasn't quite able to fully let go of the fact that they didn't need the wards anymore. But he waved at the Guardians when he saw them (though he only saw North and Toothiana, loudly discussing a new toy prototype – a giant inflatable toothbrush – which an adoring yeti had made for a certain Guardian). They waved back absently.

As Pitch lay down on his bed, blinking at Jack with a sleepy affection, Jack stared down at him and then reached out with his fingers to stroke his hair. Pitch didn't say anything, simply closed his eyes and sank into sleep almost immediately. Jack wondered just how tired Pitch was. Jack hadn't even checked to see how many of the rooms at Kostroma had been put back in order again.

They'd gotten distracted.

Jack went looking for Mora. Flying through the wind on his own had reminded him of how desperately he needed to share the sky with her again.

He found her by Sandy's giant, golden cloud. Sandy was snoring softly, but Jack waved at him anyway, and beckoned Mora towards him.

'Come on,' he whispered. 'Hop on the winds with me.'

Mora opened her mouth to shriek in excitement, pawing the air with her hooves, and Jack held up his hands and shook his head.

'Not yet! *Quietly*. Let's not wake up the guy who brought you back to life, okay?'

Mora rushed towards him, circling him enthusiastically before dashing off into the sky. She didn't even wait for him.

Jack raced after her, calling the wind to him, and she whinnied and screeched her excitement once they were away from Sandy's cloud. She turned to look at him constantly, tail flashing back and forth, eyes glowing brightly. He laughed to see her happiness.

He bumped her lightly with his staff as he finally overtook her, and watched as she galloped towards him. Mora was fast, but Jack had been doing this all his life. He knew the winds so well he sometimes couldn't tell where he stopped and they began.

'Come on, then!' he shouted, and she put on a burst of extra speed.

They raced each other through the winds, and then Mora made a huffy sound of mischief and ducked down beneath the canopy of a forest. Jack followed, curious, only to see Mora waiting for him on the ground, her body arched with playfulness.

'What is it?' Jack said, and Mora watched him, a seriousness moving into the tension of her mouth.

She folded her front legs, and then her back, and lowered herself to the ground. She tossed her head towards her back.

Jack's eyes widened.

'For real? Like, really? Now? You don't mind?'

Mora made a whuffling noise of exasperation.

It was hard arguing with that.

Jack slid onto her back, surprised at the warmth of her. Fear spiked, but quickly became background noise. He held onto her mane with one hand, carried his staff with the other.

Mora stood up and Jack rode the motion uncertainly. When she hopped into the air, his legs tightened around her, and his fingers clenched into her mane. He held his staff up for balance, and Mora sailed gently upwards.

He shifted until he felt more comfortable, then relaxed his legs, feeling the way her muscles shifted beneath her skin. For all that she was made out of sand, she had a body structure; the sand formed muscles, bone, and Jack could feel it as she stepped out into the sky, prancing a little in her excitement.

'Wow,' Jack breathed. 'Wow, this is *awesome*.'

It felt strange to give his trust to her. To not simply be carried on the winds alone. He could feel the way she stepped into different breezes. And when he called an assortment of winds to her, he was fascinated at how she chose which ones she wanted to ride. She picked different winds to him, communicated with the air differently.

The first time she put some speed into her step, he nearly slid off, but after that, after years of clumsily learning the winds and take-offs and dismounts himself, he found it far easier than he thought it would. Keeping his seat, holding his staff, making sure he didn't fall...soon they were things he didn't have to consciously think about.

'Okay, okay, I think you can step it up a bit.'

Mora looked behind him, pricking her ears as if to say: *Are you sure?*

She stepped out into a speedy, rough gallop, jerked sideways and Jack laughed as he slid off completely, letting the wind catch him as he fell. She whickered in amusement and he raced to catch up. Jack grinned as he drew up alongside her.

'Well that just means we get to try it again.'

Mora huffed an agreement, then shot away. Jack followed, letting snow and ice trail out behind him. The weather was cooling down, and he was always happy to speed it up and give the seasons a bit of a shake.

\*

When he returned, Pitch was still asleep. Mora went to her place by the armchair. The spirals that Jack had playfully sketched across her body were still melting, and she glistened with black sand and frost particles.

Jack put his staff up against the wall alongside Pitch's axe, sat on the edge of Pitch's bed, and then pulled his legs up. He looked at the golden snowflake resting on the chest of drawers.



He got off the bed and picked it up, floated onto Pitch's bed again. He placed the snowflake down beside him, and then placed his hand over one of Pitch's ankles, where it was tucked beneath a dark grey blanket.

Beneath the fears that the war had brought him, were older, ancient fears. They were carved into his heart, swam in the baseline of his thoughts. The more he enjoyed himself with Pitch, the more time they had together, the more he feared being abandoned. It struck at the core of him. Made him reluctant to leave Pitch's room, even as Pitch slept quietly.

Jack curled up at the foot of the bed and looked at the golden snowflake, sombre. He didn't know if he wanted the good dreams.

There would always be a part of him that would remember loneliness, a part of him that would remember the madness that encroached on him when he wandered through his own purgatory, uncertain of what he'd done to deserve being unseen by everyone. Eventually he'd decided that the problem must have been *him*.

'Jack,' Pitch said quietly, and Jack's eyes flew open. 'Your fears aren't like coffee, they don't need to percolate.'

'You aren't supposed to be awake,' Jack said, and Pitch shifted in the bed, moving aside and patting the space he'd made next to himself. Jack took the golden snowflake and crawled up alongside him, abashed. 'I know this is creepy.'

'Jack, we both think eavesdropping is perfectly normal and there's a part of me that will always prefer to hide in the shadows and creep up on people from behind. Creepy is something we both do.'

Pitch sounded exhausted.

'You'll always be afraid of these things,' Pitch said, settling a heavy arm around Jack's arm and reaching around to grasp Jack's hand where it held the snowflake he'd brought up with him. Pitch squeezed Jack's hand around the snowflake, and Jack's eyes flew open.

'No,' Jack said, 'I'm not tired.'

'Sandy's not going to hurt you, and the dreams won't take away your instincts or your fears.'

'I'm...' Jack didn't finish the sentence. Pitch already knew exactly what Jack was feeling.

'Oh, Jack,' Pitch sighed, squeezing Jack's hand around the snowflake once more. The snowflake suddenly heated up, and Jack knew it had activated. 'You'll always be a little more afraid of having good dreams than nightmares.'

'That sounds like...one of the stupidest things I've ever heard,' Jack said, and Pitch yawned behind him. Pitch stroked his hand down Jack's arm, and then pulled him closer with a lazy sureness that made Jack feel wanted.

'It's not stupid at all. What person would feel comfortable having good dreams, having lived so much of their lives in a nightmare?'

Jack stared ahead, and then startled when he saw a thin stream of dreamsand coil into the room and wait for him. Jack pushed himself up to check that Mora was okay, and Pitch dragged him back down again.

‘She sleeps on his sand-cloud, she no longer fears the dreamsand. Remember, she can feed on your good dreams now, too,’ Pitch said, and Jack squeezed his eyes shut.

‘Do you fear good dreams too?’ Jack said, and Pitch kissed the scar at the back of his neck. Jack tensed, and Pitch murmured a low, soothing sound.

‘We’re both somewhat broken,’ Pitch whispered. ‘Now let yourself find sleep. I’ll be right here, when you wake up.’

Jack kept his eyes closed, relaxed slowly. He sought for the blackness of sleep with an uncertain reluctance. But with Pitch’s body behind him, his arm around him, he stepped into the abyss.

\*

Jack woke feeling surprisingly well-rested, but he couldn’t remember any good dreams at all. He blinked himself awake properly, grimaced when he saw Gwyn in the room, carefully penning a note with a fountain pen.

‘Kings don’t knock, huh?’

Gwyn startled and fumbled the fountain pen. He turned to Jack and frowned.

‘I didn’t mean to wake you. This isn’t urgent.’

‘I’m awake now.’

‘Actually, I need to speak with Pitch,’ Gwyn said, and Pitch pushed himself upright with the alertness of someone who had been awake for a while.

‘Ah,’ Gwyn said, in response to that. He indicated the armchair. ‘May I sit?’

Pitch nodded, and Jack watched as Gwyn sat down awkwardly, turning the fountain pen in his hands. He stared at it, and then came to his decision quickly.

‘I owe you a debt of gratitude,’ Gwyn said to Pitch, ‘for all that you have done in working against the Unseelie Court when it was corrupted, and – of course – for teaching me the golden light that saw to the defeat of the Nightmare King. Without it, this world would be very different, as you know.’

‘I do,’ Pitch said.

‘Fae take their debts very seriously, and I do not like to be indebted to others. So I have come to ask you if there is anything you would like? Any boon I can grant you? I have...wealth, land, a great deal more.’

Pitch took a deep, long breath. He pursed his lips, considering.

‘I have wealth,’ Pitch said, and Jack stared at him in shock. ‘I have land. I would ask that you leave Jack and myself out of your schemes in the future. But I know you, Gwyn – if you had need of us, I doubt you would honour such a favour if I asked it of you. Can I not just disavow you of the debt?’

Gwyn frowned.

‘Ah, well, I had an idea...about that. It’s unorthodox, but my Inner Court have agreed with me as to its soundness. I didn’t think you would suggest anything that you wanted for yourself, so I have an offer to make you, which you may – of course – refuse. I would ask that you consider it seriously,

however.'

Pitch waited, and Gwyn spoke into the silence.

'I would ask you to join the Seelie Court.'

Pitch inhaled sharply, and Jack's mouth opened in shock. Pitch? *Seelie*?

'It's very unconventional,' Gwyn said quickly, 'but the reality is that as King, I can confer on you a fae status, and while you would not receive all of the powers that this might entail – not being fae – you would still receive increased protection in the fae world, and the Seelie Court would be obligated to protect you in the future. You and...whomever you designated as kin,' Gwyn looked over at Jack as he said that, 'could claim the Court in times of asylum, should you ever need it.'

'Would this further obligate me to you?' Pitch said, and Gwyn shook his head.

'No.'

'Would it obligate me towards the Court?'

'No,' Gwyn said. 'You know that the Seelie are not obligated to fight alongside one another. None of them were obligated even in the war against the Unseelie Court.'

'Is it permanent?' Pitch said, and Gwyn shook his head.

'If you wish to step away from the Court and its protection, this could be easily done.'

'Hey,' Jack said, 'what about me? I like...helped you defeat the Nightmare King and stuff.'

Gwyn chuckled.

'Yes, I have squared our debt. You have a way of calling me for a year and a day. I did not offer that lightly.'

Jack stared at him, and then fumbled for the piece of blue metal in his pocket. He knew it was a big deal, but he hadn't known it was *that* big of a deal.

'Also you climbed that mountain with me,' Jack said, and Gwyn turned the fountain pen in his grip. There was a woody brown ink on his fingers where some of it had spilled when he fumbled it.

'And I shall help you build your home, when you are ready.'

'I don't want to get it wrong though,' Jack said.

'There is no getting it wrong.'

'Then you obviously didn't see where I used to live,' Jack said drily, knowing full well that Gwyn had, and Pitch hummed a sound of agreement. Jack flushed, embarrassed, and Pitch laughed a few seconds later.

'I'm going to need some time to think about this,' Pitch said. 'And check and recheck everything in triplicate.'

'Of course,' Gwyn said, seeming surprisingly easy with the idea of Pitch's caution.

'I do see that this is a valuable boon you have offered,' Pitch added carefully, and Gwyn offered a

smile that was almost disarmingly shy. It was similar to the smile Gwyn had made when Jack had finally agreed to spar with him. It reminded Jack of those rare moments of connection he sometimes had with wild animals. After a few seconds, it disappeared, and Gwyn stood up, smoothing his shirt absently and then looking down at his ink-stained fingers.

‘Are things getting better in the Court?’ Jack asked, and Gwyn nodded after a brief hesitation.

‘Already, there is increased stability in the Seelie and Unseelie Courts. It will be a long time, cleaning this up. Many, many years. Centuries perhaps. But it is something of a relief to be moving in the right direction.’

Gwyn looked outside of the window hungrily, as though the walls themselves were an anathema. He raised his hand in a silent farewell to Jack and Pitch, then disappeared into light.

Jack slid off the bed and took his crooked staff where it was resting against the wall.

‘What are you gonna say?’ Jack said. He smiled at Pitch, who looked at his hands, a furrow of confusion on his forehead. Pitch looked unhappy. ‘Hey, what’s going on? Are you worried about the one who eats double-crossings in his cereal for breakfast?’

Pitch shook his head and then looked up, frowning.

‘Because you can take him,’ Jack said, and Pitch laughed a small, disbelieving sound.

‘Jack, it’s not that.’

‘Then what?’ Jack said, realising that he couldn’t joke this away. He walked over to Pitch and looked down at him, and then reached out and touched the furrows in his brow. ‘What is it?’

‘Me? The Seelie Court? Can you think of two less compatible-’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, realising. ‘Oh, alright. Because you still think you’re like the worst, and because yeah, the Court totally isn’t ruled by one of the worst *ever*.’

Pitch laughed under his breath, and then his face fell to stillness one more.

‘Some seriousness, if you please,’ Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

‘No, you just want to psych yourself out because you don’t think you deserve this. You’re not like us, you’re not a Guardian like us, and you deserve to belong somewhere, even if you never do anything more than leech them for some extra status. Gwyn was right to offer you that, even if you eventually decide no. Even when you didn’t want to, even from the very beginning when I was in the lair and injured by the Nain Rouge and I could tell you *really* didn’t want to – you still helped. And then you did it more. And then you kept doing it. Do you know how many times you’ve saved my life? I lost count.’

Jack smiled at Mora, who was still sleeping, who – after all that – was *still* sleeping.

‘Man, does he want to be your friend though,’ Jack said. ‘What did you guys do together when you used to train all the time? Make friendship bracelets?’

Pitch laughed.

‘The dreams helped you then,’ Pitch said, and Jack’s eyes widened.

‘I don’t remember any good dreams,’ Jack said, and Pitch sighed, offered a weak smile to Jack.

‘Your fear disappeared for about an hour. I regret to say I actually *panicked*. I’m used to you feeling a certain amount of fear, even in sleep, and it was – irrationally, I know – a reminder of the scarf, times when I wanted you beside me but you couldn’t be there.’

They exchanged a long look. It was easy to forget how damaged Pitch had been by all of this. He wore his damage with far more grace and talked about it far less often. It was easy to see now though, in the worn lines at his eyes. There was a grief that Pitch carried with him everywhere he went, even when his face was composed and relaxed. Jack wondered if he was the same, if he carried the shadows of a loneliness that might not ever leave.

Jack walked up to him and stood between his legs, placing one of his fingers beneath Pitch’s chin. Golden eyes looked up into his.

‘Well, I should be all afraid again now,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded, smiling ruefully.

‘You are.’

‘Not of you though.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said.

The smile Pitch gave was filled with warmth, and Jack kissed it carefully, traced the line of it with his lips. He wanted Pitch to say yes to Gwyn, knowing that the decision could be reversed. He wished everyone could know how much Pitch had done, what he’d achieved. Almost no one ever would. And to many children, he would only be remembered as a defeated Boogeyman; a spectre of darkness who was nothing more than malice.

Not this man he was able to kiss; dark and gentle all at once.

*Holy crap, Jack thought, I do love him.*

Jack stopped the kiss and they stared at each other in shock for a few seconds before Jack cleared his throat. He still didn’t feel entirely comfortable saying it, even after all this time. He’d only managed to say it under duress, when trying to make a point.

‘So, uh, killing some more shadows today?’

‘That’s the plan,’ Pitch said, and Jack, nervous, laughed.

*Great. Another day of almost getting possessed. I hate those stupid shadows.*

\*

Even arriving at a distance; Jack could tell the airplane hangar was huge.

Jack’s mouth dropped open when he saw it. It was nothing like Kostroma, which was large and had been well-maintained. This looked like it had never been cared for. The airplane hangar itself was pocked with holes from bullets, cannonballs, what looked like explosions. The outer walls, once a slick, glistening aluminium, now held more smoke stains and char marks than anything else. From the outer edge of the bitumen, Jack could see weeds and grass had pushed up through the tarmac. A tall tree had grown inside the hangar and pushed branches through some of the windows.

Even with all the wreckage, the place was impressive.

Pitch stared at the hangar, pale. The hand not holding his axe was fisted by his side. He was taking

deep, steady breaths, he looked like he was going to be sick.

‘Pitch?’ Jack said quietly.

‘There comes a point,’ Pitch said, his voice oddly distant, ‘where it doesn’t matter what she says – I only want to hear her voice again.’

Jack’s eyes widened.

‘They know that, of course,’ Pitch said, raising his fisted hand to his stomach and holding it there for a few seconds. His voice lacked its usual smoothness, turning into a rasp. Jack placed a hand on the wrist that was resting against his ribs.

‘We could go back?’ Jack said, and Pitch shook his head, resolute.

‘Or we could go forward,’ he said.

‘Can you do it?’ Jack said, voice shaking. ‘If you want to hear her voice again...and the shadows sound like her, then how...?’

Pitch made eye contact with him, and there was something raw in his gaze. It shocked Jack into silence. Behind them, in dense forest, songbirds chirped at each other. Overhead, the clouds had parted to reveal a sun that held very little warmth. The only thing that seemed to stir in the airplane hangar itself were the branches of the tree that had grown beyond it.

Something stirred in the forest. Jack whirled around to see a large black bear move away.

‘Why does it look like this – so run down – if the magic is supposed to keep it preserved?’

‘Because the magic preserved it in the state the Nightmare King left it in. The Nightmare King was something of an engineer; the shadows needed technology and they had possessed a body with an aptitude for it. Before I was possessed, I liked knowing how things worked. This was where weapons were tested, where machinery was made, where frustrations were vented. The Nightmare King was constantly aware of his weakening state on this planet, and the hangar was where he dealt with his bitterness.’

Pitch’s steps were silent, cautious as he moved forward on the tarmac. Jack floated a few paces behind him. Jack had no idea exactly what to expect, but he knew to expect *something*.

As they got closer, Jack’s fear spiralled upwards. He wondered how Pitch felt.

The hangar was closed except for a side entrance that had been blasted open with some kind of explosion. Pitch lifted his axe in both hands and peered through the door, stepped into the dusty gloom.

Shafts of cool light that entered lit thick motes of dust. Jack’s eyes found giant pieces of discarded machinery and his breath became shallow with a mix of amazement and fear. Metal and gears fitted together with glass and fibreglass. What looked like aircraft wings severed from the body of the aircraft; but there was no other signs of the aircraft he could see. Huge robots were affixed to the side of the hangar with long, plastic tubes, their glass panels where a person might sit were dark and fogged up. They were rusted, showed signs of disuse. Every single one of them different, as though the designs had been improved and altered each time.

Long trestle tables were covered in dull gears and fixtures, sharp jags of metal and coils of wire that spooled in loops or had been twisted together on what looked like circuit boards. Jack’s eyes

couldn't pick everything out, a great deal of it hidden in darkness. He could smell motor oil and the sharpness of factory work, the kind where metal and glass dust hung in the air long after work had been completed. It was a grey, gloomy world, only broken up by the colours of wires, and one lonely, unexpected tree pushing its way through concrete.

Pitch stopped when he saw the metal box, he called the golden light to his axe.

It made the large robots even eerier.

Pitch looked around the room very slowly, and then he took a deep, shuddering breath.

'Uh oh,' Pitch whispered.

'Uh oh? What the hell? *Uh oh?*' Jack's voice had shot up into the next octave, even as he tried to keep his voice down.

'Are you any good at freezing machinery?'

Jack's heart rabbit-thumped in his chest as he stared around at all the robots hanging on the wall. Pitch's axe moved back and forth like a torch, and Jack realised the glass visors were *still* an opaque, murky black. Jack realised there were shadows in there. Shadows in the mechanical robot-suits.

*How about we just leave now and never come back? Why aren't they attacking? What were they waiting for?*

'Yeah,' Jack said, and then made a small, high-pitched noise. He would never get used to the shadows. *Never.*

Pitch and Jack looked at the metal box at the same time. Jack's hands shook. The butterfly of light exuding from Pitch's axe trembled.

'At least we have a head start?' Jack said, but his voice trembled with fear. 'I hate this. I hate this more than I've hated a lot of the stupid things we've had to do.'

Pitch was silent when he reached the shiny, metal box. A long rectangle of clean metal – the only clean metal in the room and startling because of it – waiting on the floor. There was a tiny card on it and Jack flew over, holding his staff in a double-handed grip, staring at the robots, before risking a look at what the card said:

*Daddy, do you remember?*

Pitch took a deep breath.

'I need to get high enough to get the light into the visors,' Pitch said. 'You can't start freezing them until they've reached the ground. Some of them are *fast*, so you need to *stay back*.'

Pitch's words weren't reassuring at all. One look at Pitch's face showed that they weren't meant to be.

'Jack, are you listening to me?' Pitch said.

Jack nodded, but stared at the robots. He had a lot of ice now at his disposal. He could freeze whatever needed freezing. But first the robots had to be activated, and-

*That's panic. Okay, I'm panicking. That's happening.*

Pitch bent down quickly and lifted the card, and there was a tiny click in the metallic box. The lid swung open and Pitch buried his axe inside, but no shadows streamed out of the box. It was empty, only a few metal shavings in the bottom left corner.

In the hangar itself, metal shrieked into life.

Large, humanoid robots disengaged themselves from the wall, ripping away the rubber hosing keeping them attached. And sibilant laughter echoed – louder than Jack expected – through the PA systems wired into the robots.

A small sob from a girl, magnified so that it bounced off the walls themselves, and Jack froze. Pitch's axe paused in mid-swing.

*'D-Daddy...Daddy you're hurting me!'*

Jack would have dropped his staff if he'd been holding it in one hand instead of two. He whirled back to Pitch, eyes huge, but they didn't have the luxury of time, and he couldn't pull his thoughts together to speak the horror dawning inside of him.

The robots were *fast*.

Jack shot ice at them even as Pitch seemed rooted to the spot, mouth open like he'd been punched in the face.

*'PITCH!'* Jack screamed, because the robot he'd frozen to a halt only a metre away from him, was streaming Nightmare Men out of the visor, and Jack couldn't make the light. He couldn't do anything except freeze the machinery.

It wasn't Jack's scream that snapped Pitch out of it, but the sound of Seraphina wailing, high and distraught, echoing and bouncing off planes of metal, turning it into wails that crashed together, a cacophony in Jack's ears.

Pitch burst into sudden, frenetic movement. Light blazed, and Pitch slammed his axe into the head of the first robot, cleaving it down the middle, metal shrieking and tearing with a terrible noise. Shadows extinguished under the force of it, and Pitch ripped the axe out only to leap at the robot closer to Jack.

There was an awful expression on his face; a twisted rictus. As soon as Pitch had dealt with the shadows closest to Jack, he ran back into the throng, ducking and weaving through the smashing of metal arms and the laughter of the Nightmare Men, the coalescing horror of the shadows.

Jack kept freezing the robots where he could, but he was losing Pitch amongst the machinery. He could see bursts of golden light, hear the sounds of metal tearing, see panels of it clanging to the ground. Jack was certain Pitch couldn't take on all those robots, all those shadows himself.

But Pitch seemed to know exactly where to aim, he worked with a fervour that bordered on madness. Jack – in the end – had to hang back, panicking by an empty metal box. There was nothing he could do.

His hands shook as he held his staff, and then suddenly, amidst the sound of metal falling, amidst the almighty crashes of an unbreakable axe against well-made robots, Pitch keened in distress.

Jack jolted, flew over. Terror was bile in the back of his throat.

*He's been possessed, he's been possessed, he's been-*



Pitch was leaning over a robot in the corner of the hangar, light guttering from his axe. One of his hands was over his face, nails digging in so hard that blood trickled down his cheek. Nearby, other robots seized spasmodically, in the throes of having their circuits scrambled. Jack could see no shadows.

He looked around warily, approached Pitch, scared.

‘Are they gone?’ Jack said. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘I *don’t* remember,’ Pitch said, his voice broken. It wasn’t an answer to Jack’s questions.

Jack reached up and placed his hand over Pitch’s where it clawed into his face. He stared around, eyes wide, still unconvinced the shadows were gone. A hot brand of blood touched his fingers, and he levered his fingers underneath Pitch’s palm, trying to move his hand away. Pitch’s breath was gasping out of him in short, strained shocks.

‘I don’t *remember*,’ Pitch said again, and his shoulders heaved. His knees buckled. Jack followed him to the ground and tried to keep an eye on the hangar and an eye on Pitch.

‘Pitch, hey, it’s me, Jack. You know, the one who doesn’t want us to get possessed and...just, can you tell me if the shadows are gone, please? Please?’

The light died from Pitch’s axe completely, and Pitch’s chest heaved again. The movement was so violent Jack couldn’t tell if it was a sob or if he was about to throw up.

‘Gone,’ Pitch said. ‘They’re gone.’

‘You can sense that?’

Jack couldn’t tell if Pitch was even in the room, he felt so distant. Was he talking about the shadows he’d just killed? Or was he millions of kilometres away, somewhere in the past, talking about something completely different?

Jack finally managed to lever Pitch’s hand away from his face and he made a small sound when he saw the divots in Pitch’s skin. The blood. He placed his fingertips gently over the cuts and called the smallest amount of ice to his fingertips, freezing the wounds shut. Pitch jerked at that, and his eyes opened.

Tears clung to his eyelashes.

‘I don’t remember,’ Pitch said again, and Jack stared at him.

He knew what the shadows were doing now. Knew that they were trying to get Pitch to remember Seraphina’s last moments. Knew from that awful line that Seraphina hadn’t just died in the war, away from her father; that no such mercy would be granted to Pitch.

The Nightmare King had seen to her personally.

‘I don’t want you to remember,’ Jack said. ‘Not *ever*.’

‘I don’t want to remember,’ Pitch’s voice cracked. His chest heaved in a series of silent, shuddering sobs. He let go of the axe handle and it fell with a clank to the ground. He leaned forwards and Jack dropped his own staff as both of his hands caught the weight of Pitch falling against him.

‘Hey,’ Jack said, voice soft. ‘Okay, hey. I’ve got you.’

Jack wrapped an arm around Pitch's shaking body, feeling dwarfed by him, still not entirely convinced the shadows were gone.

He wanted to throw up. He wanted to be outside in the daylight again. He wanted to be away from this horrible place, back in Kostroma. He wanted to help. He didn't know how.

There was nothing he could do against the strength and weight of this.

Pitch's shoulders had stopped moving. He was simply breathing raggedly against Jack. The fight had gone out of him. Jack wasn't surprised. He'd fought with a strength and speed that reminded him of berserkers.

'Two more locations,' Pitch said, his voice eerily even. He moved back from Jack, and there was a terrible stillness to his face. Pitch stood and picked up his axe. 'Two more locations left.'

'Pitch?' Jack said, and Pitch stared at him, expression empty.

Jack didn't know if Pitch would survive what was coming next. The strain it was taking on Pitch's state of mind...

'Pitch, don't shut me out,' Jack said, softly. 'Please?'

'The shadows are gone from here,' Pitch said, and then his forehead twisted and he touched fingertips to the iced wounds at the side of his head. 'That's...a handy skill.'

'Yeah, that's great, but I can't tell if you're trying to pull yourself together or if you're just-'

'I did all those terrible things,' Pitch said, his voice becoming dreamlike. 'I destroyed worlds. People. Cultures.'

'No,' Jack said, hooking onto Pitch's forearm with his staff, in the hopes that Pitch would become irritated enough to snap out of it. Pitch gazed into the middle distance and said nothing, even when Jack tugged. 'No! Don't do this, that was the Nightmare King and you know it!'

'This body,' Pitch said. 'These hands.'

'You are *not* the Nightmare King! You know how I know? Because firstly I killed the Nightmare King, me and Gwyn; we did that. And secondly, you have never, ever, *ever* – even when you think you're the worst thing on the planet – *ever* treated me the way that he did when I encountered him.'

Pitch closed his eyes slowly, and a tear traced its way over the outer edge of his cheekbone.

'It doesn't hurt as much this way,' Pitch said. 'It doesn't hurt as much to think this way. Jack, these things I know. It is always easier to hate yourself for crimes committed, then to look at the grief beneath it and live that instead. *You* know that too.'

His voice was soft, it cracked over his words.

'The shadows are gone?' Jack said, reaching for his staff, and Pitch nodded. 'Can you get us the hell out of here? Please? Can we go to Kostroma?'

Pitch opened his arms absently, took up his axe, and didn't notice that Jack was starting to cry when they teleported away.

He didn't have enough time to snap himself out of it by the time they arrived in Pitch's room in Kostroma, where the weather was inclement and raining heavily. He stepped away, rubbing a hand over his face, trying to erase all signs of his distress. How was it that Pitch could comfort him over and over again and be straight-faced and calm about it almost all the time, even when he could read other people's fears, and when Jack did it, it wrecked something inside of him?

'Jack?' Pitch said, quietly, and Jack shook his head. His chest hurt.

'Come here,' Pitch said, voice soft. 'It helps, you being close.'

Jack stared at him, certain Pitch was lying, and that was when Pitch caught Jack's expression and he winced.

'Come here,' Pitch said, resting his axe against the wall and sitting down on the side of the bed. 'Please?'

Jack put his staff down and floated over to the bed, tucking his legs under himself and looking at Pitch warily. Pitch reached out and thumbed some of Jack's tears away.

'I don't like to think of how many years I've lost,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

'You mean how many were taken from you.'

'I...'

'Those shadows victimised you,' Jack said, voice persistent, even though he felt more tears close to the surface.

'Jack, I handled myself. I survived.'

'You're...lying to me,' Jack said, amazed. 'You're lying to *yourself*. You survived, okay, yeah. You handled yourself? What is that? What does that even *mean*? You just told me it's easier to think of yourself as the Nightmare King, does that sound like- What does that sound like to you? What would you say to me if I said that to you?'

Pitch closed his eyes and swallowed.

'Yeah, you know how I have all that crap I haven't dealt with in like...three centuries? I'm thinking you know a little of what that's like.'

Jack crawled closer and wrapped his arms around Pitch's middle, took a deep breath. He felt like he had the airplane hangar all over him, realised he probably did. He, like Pitch, smelt of metal and dust. Except that Pitch had bits of actual metal clinging to the felt of his robe, there was a small tear in his sleeve.

'I finally understood what he meant,' Pitch said, and Jack squeezed tighter, waiting for Pitch to explain.

'When Gwyn told me I would one day understand the purpose of the axe, I was very tempted to punch him. But today we would *never* have survived without that axe. The sword couldn't cut through metal like that, and whatever alloy the Glasera dwarves used with the sword-metal...I've never used anything quite like it. It carries a broader array of light. The axe allows the light to move in two directions at once, instead of a single wave. He made...he made the right choice. I've been stubborn.'

‘Oh, really?’ Jack said, rolling his eyes. ‘You? Stubborn? About the *axe*? You don’t say.’

‘Careful, you’re starting to sound like *me*,’ Pitch said, and Jack buried his face in Pitch’s robes. There were worse things in life, he was sure.

‘Can you tell me something?’ Jack said, into the robe itself. Pitch waited, which Jack took to mean that he could. ‘Can you tell me why the sword was like...the locket?’

Pitch took a deep breath, held it, and then sighed it out. He twisted onto the bed properly, moved up towards the pillows, and then pulled Jack over, so that he was lying alongside him, head resting on his chest. Pitch wrapped an arm around Jack’s back, and looked out of the large, glass window, eyes distant.

‘Once,’ Pitch said, voice deep. ‘Once, if you can imagine, there was a young girl who laughed and skipped and hardly walked a single place in her life if she could run there, no matter how often she grazed her knees. Her parents were Golden Warriors and they fought a terrible darkness. She didn’t live with them, but she saw them as often as they could see her, and she loved them so fiercely she learned the wooden swords herself from a very young age. She wasn’t a Golden Warrior, but she was determined to learn what her parents knew.

‘When she saw me, especially as she got older, she would marvel over my weapons even as I marvelled over her. She knew how sacred the sword was. It is a gift, a sacred gift against the dark. It is given to us by the stars, and it is worked into its form by a single smith who etched our alphabet into its blades and with it, told our story. We only needed to look down and there, an alphabet reminding us that we had confronted the shadows in our very heart of hearts and survived. That we had met the stars and been gifted with the ability to create the golden light.’

Jack looked up at Pitch, and Pitch looked down at him, a faint smile on his face.

‘So you see that the weapon was already very important to me, even...before,’ Pitch said. ‘I – more than the others perhaps – needed the constant reminder that the light had found me worthy, because even with my arrogance, I still couldn’t quite understand *why* I had been found worthy. To see the sword in my hands, its alphabet reminding me that I, like the others, could make the golden light... it kept me from becoming overly arrogant. It grounded me when I lost my way. It literally held a light against the dark.’

Pitch absently placed a hand in Jack’s hair, and Jack flinched away, making a sound of frustration at himself.

Pitch stiffened and then placed an apologetic hand against Jack’s face.

‘Should we stop?’ Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

‘When I was taken by the shadows, I fought them. I was only freshly possessed and I *fought*. There were moments where I was a conglomerate of shadows. Moments where I was myself. Moments where I could not distinguish between the two. And in amongst all of that: *Carnage*. Evacuations. My people whom I had protected all my life panicking, running away at my footsteps. Sometimes I would come back to blood on my hands, dripping from my mouth, bodies around me. I would come back to Nightmare Men rising from the bodies of dead Golden Warriors.

‘Seraphina was to be evacuated. I have pieced together her story, in this. Pieced it together and this is what I know. She must have escaped her guardian, run down into the prison of the living shadows where I’d dropped my sword, the Nightmare Men unable to bear the pain of it. She took up the sword and brought it back to my room, knowing that at some point I – my possessed self –

would go there, looking for things to destroy, to loot, to take with me on the Nightmare Galleon.

‘My brave- My *bravest* girl, she placed the sword on my bed, knowing what it meant to me, knowing that she herself could not stay. And then, do you know, she always loved flowers. We had flowers such as you have never seen on this planet. Flowers that glowed and changed colours, tiny flowers the size of grains of sand that chimed like bells when you picked them. And Seraphina, not being a Golden Warrior herself, loved everything of nature. She cultivated them, had a wonderful gift with them. She had her own garden at a young age, and that garden *loved* her.’

Jack’s heart was beating so hard he thought it was going to come out of his chest. He reached up and touched Pitch’s face, felt hot tears against his fingertips, and stroked his cheek.

‘She took the best flowers from the garden. The ones she told me were too nice to even pick, the most precious ones – some only flowered once every five or ten years – and she spread them all around the sword. A circle of dazzling colour and light. And then, she did evacuate. I do remember that much. To where, I don’t remember. For how long? I don’t remember.’

Pitch’s voice broke, and he took several deep, shuddering breaths.

‘And the Nightmare King strode into that room and saw the sword and Jack, that sword, it *hurts* the shadows. They *loathe* that metal as you cannot imagine. But he stopped, I even remember the shock of it. For there was a space left and I fought my way back into my own body and saw it, and knew that she was gone, had fled, had left me this reminder of my initiation; a sign that I should fight. I remember, then, fighting in my own mind against the living shadows, a terrible, agonising battle. We *shredded* at each other. It was the most terrible pain I have experienced in my life.

‘For the briefest moment, I won back myself. I could not touch the sword, but I wrapped it up – flowers and all – in the blanket and even though the Nightmare King drove my steps mercilessly to the Nightmare Galleon, I was able to stow it where I thought he might not find it. And then...my mind was taken from me, and I forgot. Something about that fight meant the Nightmare King couldn’t throw it away. When I came back to myself in the lair, after the Nain Rouge had attacked me, I found an ancient blanket in a cupboard, desiccated flowers inside, still fragrant after all that time. I found a sword...’

Pitch’s voice broke, and he turned to his side, his knees pressing up against Jack’s body as he tried to curl in on himself.

‘I miss it,’ Pitch said, laughing at himself. ‘It’s materialistic but I *do*. I see that axe and it is not at all like holding the message my daughter gave to me, the message the stars gave to me.’

Pitch shuddered into silence and Jack crawled on top of him, trying to hold those terrible tremors in, even while shedding his own tears. He felt awful. He hadn’t known. But the worst part was – even if he had known, even if he *had*, they still needed to do it. They still needed to sacrifice the sword to get Pitch back.

It all made sense now; how upset and vicious Pitch became when he discovered the sword had been destroyed. He must have come back from the Nightmare King a second time and to not even have that anymore...

Pitch only really had two connections to what he cared about in his past, and Jack had destroyed one of them.

‘I didn’t know what else to do,’ Jack said, his voice breaking, and Pitch wrapped his arms around Jack tightly, half-rolling him into the bed.

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t know what else you could have done. I still have the locket. I have you. I have myself.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said quietly, but he knew in that moment, it wasn’t enough. Pitch had probably told himself all of those things, many times, since discovering the sword had been destroyed. He pushed his other hand into Pitch’s hair and stroked his cheek.

Two more locations.

Jack hated the Nightmare King. *Hated* him. That he would plot something like this. It wasn’t even the planting of the living shadows in different locations, or the foresight needed to do it. It was the cruelty of it. He’d taken enough, already, and that he could do this, beyond the grave, was the taste of bile in the back of his throat, the feel of saltwater against his fingertips.

‘You’re so strong,’ Jack said, and then tightened his hand in Pitch’s hair.

*I love you.*

He couldn’t say it. The words waited on his tongue, ready to spill, but he couldn’t push them forth. He was afraid. Afraid the timing was wrong, afraid Pitch wouldn’t want to hear them now.

But Pitch’s arms tightened around him anyway, and Jack wondered if Pitch could read the message of it through Jack’s fears.

He hoped so.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Share and Share Alike,’ Pitch and Jack travel to Pemberton, Western Australia, where the Nightmare King has stepped up his terrorisation of Pitch. And Jack begins to share some of his own trauma with Pitch.

# Share and Share Alike

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jack still wasn't ready to start staying in Kostroma, and he had a sneaking suspicion that Sandy and North weren't ready to let him go anyway. So after shaking off the worst of the encounter at the airplane hangar, they made their way back to the Workshop.

For a couple of days, Pitch was pensive. Sometimes he disappeared to the library, or to talk with Toothiana, and he'd be quiet afterwards. He didn't seem to be in a rush to travel to the next location to defeat the shadows. Jack wondered what went on in his head. For all that he could read the fears of others, he wasn't often forthcoming with his own thoughts. Jack gave him his space, then curled up on Pitch's bed at night, even when he wasn't tired. Pitch encouraged him to have the good dreams once more; and Jack didn't remember them again the next morning.

It was a cool, Thursday morning that Jack woke up alone in the bed, hand reaching out to soak up the last of Pitch's body heat, only to find the mattress completely cold. Pitch had been awake for a while.

Jack focused his concentration on the wind, and a friendly breeze coiled around him. He followed it outside of the Workshop, down towards the outdoor feasting area that the yeti often used. Pitch was there, sitting alone, an empty, colourful ceramic plate on the table. Jack could tell from the crumbs that there'd likely been cinnamon cookies on there.

'Couldn't sleep?' Jack said, and Pitch looked at him and offered a weak smile. He said nothing, which was par for the course.

Jack sat cross-legged on the table, fingering up some of the crumbs and licking them off his finger. One of the things he'd learned about grief was that sometimes all he could do was sit there and not run away from the difficulty of someone else's pain.

It was a helplessness that Jack wasn't used to feeling.

They both turned when they heard heavy footsteps approaching, only to see North, rugged up and warm, a huge Santa's hat on his head – complete with little bells at the end that chimed as he walked. He gestured to ask if he could sit down, and Jack nodded. North sat opposite Pitch, and smiled when he saw the empty plate. He reached over and spun it in his clever fingers. When he stopped, the plate spun quietly off the wooden table and kept spinning in the air. North's magic was spilling out. Even when North was taking a break from the Workshop itself, Christmas sang out of his fingertips.

'You are looking a little more like yourself, these days,' North said, and Jack smiled at him.

'Feeling it,' Jack said, and then shrugged. 'Well, sort of. More than before.'

'That is being for the best, I think. No one should go back to who they were in the past. We are not put on this world to go backwards, yes?'

Jack beamed at him.

'I have to say,' Pitch said, 'I never imagined I'd be sitting here with the both of you, not actively scheming your demise.'

‘Yeah, you say that, but I bet you still scheme it anyway,’ Jack said, and North rumbled a laugh.

‘Pitch, you have been fighting a good fight by our side for some time.’

‘You thinking about the Seelie Court thing?’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded again.

They all heard the whirr of wings at the same time and looked up to see Toothiana flying down towards them. A moment later, Baby Tooth shot into Jack’s hood and snuggled in, chirping happily. Jack reached behind himself and cradled her briefly with his hand, smiling.

‘Brr, it is *cold!* I’m going to be heading back to my lovely, *warm* home in about a week or two I think. I have to say though, I’ve been enjoying the holiday!’

‘Holiday for *you*, maybe’ North groused, and Toothiana sat next to North, wings still fluttering slowly, a constant source of movement.

‘And for you! Aren’t you always telling Bunny that Christmas is the superior holiday?’ Toothiana said, jabbing him with her index finger, feathers flaring.

North laughed. The plate finally stopped spinning in the air and lowered quietly back to the table again.

‘So, are you both staying in the Workshop today? Or are you off on another quest?’ North said to both Jack and Pitch, and Pitch smiled a little.

‘Pemberton, Western Australia today.’

‘Pemberton?’ North said, and then he beamed. ‘I send some of my best wooden toys to Pemberton! There are not many children being there, but it is a lovely little community. Very large trees. Have to make sure the reindeer behave themselves and are not with the getting tangled! Rudolph does it on purpose, of this I am sure.’

Jack turned to Pitch, it was the first he’d heard of it.

‘Yeah? Today?’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

‘Unless you’d rather wait?’

‘No, it’s not that,’ Jack said, and then took a deep breath. ‘No, I mean I’d rather not be doing it at all, but I guess I think it’s better to get it over and done with. And if anything does go wrong, I can summon Gwyn now, and he can make the light too.’

The problem was that – as far as Jack could tell – things were still going wrong even when they were going right. Seeing Pitch shattered by his exposure to Seraphina’s voice, the constant reminders of his past – that was no victory, even when they triumphed.

‘Are there many more of these places left?’ North said and Pitch shook his head.

‘No, after this, the last place – I believe – is the Nightmare King’s old, underground lair. I believe you know *that* quite well. You’ve visited me there before.’

Jack shivered. He remembered the last time he’d been in the lair with North. Back when he thought that the worst thing that had ever happened to him was Jamie dying, the Nain Rouge attacking him.

*Wow, life sure does like proving me wrong.*



Jack placed a careful hand over the pale scar at his neck, and then turned to Pitch.

‘Hey,’ Jack said, and Pitch raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement. ‘What happened to the rest of the powers you or...the Nightmare King sucked up from the Nain Rouge? You were able to give me my frost back, but...’

‘I don’t know,’ Pitch said quietly.

He looked at North and Toothiana, and Jack thought he was silently asking them to leave. But either Toothiana and North didn’t get the hint, or they wanted to hear the conversation. Pitch sighed.

‘I wasn’t entirely the Nightmare King, when I attacked the Nain Rouge,’ Pitch said, wincing. ‘I wanted to make sure there were no more shadows left to possess you. And I was a little angry at her, to be *honest*.’

Jack’s eyes widened.

‘Wait, you...*what*?’

‘I’ve told you before, there were times when I was both myself *and* the Nightmare King. I remember there were things I *had* to try and do. Destroy the Nain Rouge, get your power back – it’s not something I could have done as Pitch, but I could use the Nightmare King’s ability to suck the shadows out of someone in order to have your power piggyback along. I didn’t know it would work.’

Pitch looked at Jack and frowned.

‘I feel them. The other powers. I feel them there. But they are not mine, not my instincts, and I cannot do anything with them. Sometimes it is *very* much like having a pebble stuck in your shoe. I talked with Gwyn about it, he said chances are high they’re stuck there now.’

‘A very persistent pebble then,’ North said.

‘My favourite kind,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ve had to share this body with living shadows, and now that they are gone, I find myself sharing it with the myriad powers of many spirits I’ve never known or met. There’s nothing I can do. The darkness carved too deeply into my spirit. Apparently that leaves a lot of room for...this bric-a-brac.’

‘But you gave my power back,’ Jack said.

Pitch made a pained look.

‘I just knew that I had to...keep it separate, and give it back somehow. I don’t remember how I gave it back to you, I don’t remember much of that time.’

Pitch’s gaze was hurt as he looked at Jack. He remembered enough, Jack realised. He remembered seeing the frost facsimile of his daughter taken away from him.

Jack looked down at the wood-grain. He startled when Pitch took his hand in his own and squeezed it. Jack squeezed back, and they let go. Pitch still wasn’t entirely comfortable being affectionate with Jack around the other Guardians. He’d mentioned a few times that he was certain that North was capable of murdering first and feeling regret later, and Jack just laughed at him until he realised that Pitch was being at least partly serious.

‘Feathers are just not enough to deal with this weather!’ Toothiana exclaimed, and Baby Tooth squeaked an agreement from Jack’s hood. ‘Sorry, I know I’m interrupting, but honestly, how do you all just *sit* there like that? No, wait, don’t explain it, I’m sitting with a frost guardian, a Christmas guardian, and Pitch who lived in that infernal lair close to that lava-like heat for long enough. You’re all just superhuman. Bunnymund and I will be the normal ones, looking forward to the warmer weather.’

‘Uck,’ Jack said. ‘Warmer weather. No thanks. You can keep it all. I’ll keep winter for myself.’

‘What about you, Pitch? Do you have a favourite season?’ Toothiana said, an unmistakeable warmth in her voice. Pitch returned the smile, which Jack found kind of fascinating. Pitch having friends was still a bit surprising.

‘Well,’ Pitch said, looking at his hands where they rested on the table. ‘*Well*, where I came from, we didn’t have four distinct seasons. We had six to eight seasons, and I suppose the one I enjoyed was comparable to your Spring in a temperate region. But...I must admit that since then, I’ve become quite partial to winter too.’

He looked at Jack, and Jack flushed.

‘Geez,’ Jack said. ‘Come on.’

North laughed, and Toothiana beamed at them both.

‘These places of yours,’ North said suddenly, to Pitch. ‘You say the lair is last. How can you be sure?’

‘Because the Nightmare King destroyed a great many of his residences over time. He was not precious with either objects or people, preferring to destroy instead of maintain. Those that were preserved were often preserved due to my indirect influence. Kostroma and Pemberton in particular.’

‘So you were fighting back, even with those shadows possessing you?’ North said, a touch of wonder entering his voice.

‘I...sometimes,’ Pitch said. He looked tense.

‘That must have been taking a lot of strength, Pitch,’ North said and Pitch opened his mouth to disagree.

‘It did,’ Jack said firmly, daring Pitch to contradict him.

Toothiana rose up from the table, beating her wings furiously to bring more warmth to her body.

‘I’m going to find a fireplace! I’ll leave sitting outside in the cold to you three!’ Toothiana said. Baby Tooth squeaked in eager agreement, and they both flew off towards one of the open windows at the top of the Workshop.

North stood a moment later and took the plate up in his hands.

‘I have a holiday to perfect,’ he said. He looked at them both as he stood. ‘I am hoping this all goes well for you both, yes? The defeating of the rest of the shadows? To think that we could be nearly rid of them. It is hard to imagine.’

‘Isn’t it?’ Pitch said, in dark agreement.

North offered a sympathetic smile and then crunched his way across the snow, back to the Workshop.

Jack reached out for Pitch's hand again, and Pitch interlaced his fingers with Jack's without hesitation. The warmth was a brand against his skin, and Jack swallowed to feel it. He craved it, he realised. The heat against his cool skin, the way it warmed him through.

'I was angry,' Jack said, keeping his head down. Pitch squeezed Jack's hand, encouraging him to go on, though Jack doubted Pitch had any idea what he was talking about.

'I was angry that you spent all that golden light on Bunnymund at the gymnasium. You- I was angry at both of you for doing that. I've never seen eye to eye with Bunnymund anyway and I guess I was just looking for an excuse with him. But I just find myself thinking, if you hadn't done that, maybe when you took on the shadows in the gymnasium it would have all been different and-'

Pitch squeezed his hand firmly.

'No,' Pitch said, firmly. 'No. It wouldn't have changed anything. I had an army for a reason when I was a general. That one man could stand up to *that*? No. It was hopeless.'

Pitch's voice remained even and strong, but Jack could detect the smallness in it. In the way Pitch's hand went still in Jack's. In the way his shoulders bowed, just slightly.

'If we get Pemberton and the lair out of the way, then...'

'Then foreseeing anything in the future, we will be...we will close a chapter of my life that has been open for far too long.'

'So let's close it already,' Jack said.

\*

Pemberton was not what Jack expected.

It was a warm, sunny day. Far warmer than he was used to, even under the towering canopy of tall, graceful karri trees. He stood in a spot of shade – of which there was plenty amongst the sun-dappled ground – and stared at the canopy, hundreds of metres above him. Around him, street-light straight trees with huge boles, trunks the colour of silver and cream, grey and pink, shot up into the air with stately grandeur. The ground was covered in leaf-litter and ferns, in twining vines with dark, glossy green leaves that tumbled forth blossoms of wild wisteria in a deep purple.

It smelled of eucalyptus and honey – a side effect of the nectar from all the flowers that were blossoming. Around them, the alien calls of birds that Jack wasn't familiar with. Twitters alongside piping, fluting calls. Nearby, something that might have been a raven, though it had a different call to what Jack was used to.

In the distance, a wooden cabin. It looked like the kind of place tourists would escape to. It was single-storey but large, with a wide, sweeping veranda. The preserving magic had kept it free of falling twigs, leaves and branches, though a single vine of something green had made its way up the banister enclosing the steps leading to the entrance. Perhaps it had been allowed before the preserving magic had taken it over.

It was nice, Jack realised. It was secluded and wild and out of the way. The cabin was absolutely dwarfed by the karri forest itself. The whole place made Jack feel tiny, as he did amongst

redwoods.

Pitch looked at the house and frowned.

'I can't sense any shadows, which means they are all likely in the box.'

'Maybe there's none here at all?'

'No, I remember...this I remember,' Pitch breathed. 'I remember Pemberton.'

'It's hard to imagine the Nightmare King coming to a place like this.'

Pitch adjusted his grip on the axe, and strode forward; determined. Jack floated behind him, a familiar spike of fear rising within.

They followed a winding, peaty pathway to the house itself. Pitch paused before the steps, placing his hand over the vine that twirled around the wood. Jack felt like he was melting from the heat of the day. His breathing was laboured. He took a deep, ragged breath.

Pitch turned to him, eyes widening.

'I'm not made for this weather,' Jack said, grimacing.

'I can take you back,' Pitch said, and Jack laughed at him.

'Yeah, after last time? Keep dreaming,' Jack said, and wiped his hand across his forehead. 'I'll be alright.'

Pitch nodded curtly, and walked up the steps quickly, throwing open the unlocked door and holding his axe up, ready.

He gasped at what he saw. He turned, pushed past Jack, bolting away from whatever was in the house.

As no living shadows immediately poured out of the house, Jack – heart thumping like mad in his chest, listening to the sound of Pitch vomiting violently behind him – entered the cabin.

He cried out, placed a hand over his mouth in horror.

*No, no, no.*

Illustrations of Seraphina hung on the walls, rested on the table, against the cushions of a couch, sat propped up over a long-dormant fireplace. They were rendered in charcoal and blood on cheap paper.

Jack saw terrorised eyes, a twisted mouth and pained, frightened expressions. And blood. A lot of blood.

Resting against a metal, rectangular box, in the middle of the room, was an illustration of Seraphina staring sightlessly upwards. The illustration itself was spattered with blood. Jack's stomach turned as he imagined the Nightmare King bleeding himself to give the image a violent accuracy.

Jack turned back to see Pitch on the forest floor, bent double, chest heaving as he continued to retch, no longer bringing anything up.

Jack turned back to the room itself and felt fury overtake his fear. He grabbed all of the illustrations, scrunching them up as he went. The rectangular box hiding the shadows still had a single card on top, so he even risked taking the illustration of the dead Seraphina that was leaning against it. There was no click. The box stayed dormant.

He went from room to room, collecting image after image. The patience it must have taken, the cruelty to imagine something like this. Jack stopped and bent over, retched. He forced himself to straighten and continue despite the sweat beading across his brow.

In the end, he had a bundle of about sixty illustrations, all different sizes. He went through the living room one more time to make sure he hadn't missed anything, before throwing them all into the fireplace. He found matches resting in a bowl, and lit them one by one, tossing them onto the paper, gritting his teeth against the heat of the fire as the flames took the horrible images away.

He was glad Pitch didn't have to see the rest of them. Jack was sure he'd be seeing images of her outstretched hand – of her wide open mouth screaming for help or in terror – for the rest of his life.

Jack waited by the fire until the pictures were ash and curling bits of paper. He prodded them deeper into the fireplace with a poker, and then added smaller twigs from the wood-box until a proper fire kindled into being. He hadn't done this in over three centuries, but he still remembered how to do this.

But the *heat*...

Jack staggered outside, past the rectangular box. At least an hour had passed. Pitch was standing there, face wrecked. He looked like someone who had wiped tears away, only for them to come back again and again. Jack winced to see the expression, and then walked straight into him, wrapping his arms around him. Tears sprung to Jack's eyes and he shook his head into Pitch's robe.

'Do it,' Jack said. 'Just plant the axe in the box.'

'You didn't have to do...' Pitch cut himself off. 'Thank you.'

They separated. Jack followed as Pitch walked into the house, raising his axe. He looked around, then stared at the fire in the fireplace.

They both looked down at the card at the same time:

*I hope you're having as much fun as I am.*

Pitch lifted the card, weariness on his face. He let it flutter to the side. The golden light flickered weakly from his axe, then flared into life. In a single, sharp movement, Pitch buried the axe in the metal box before any Nightmare Men could escape.

They sibilantly hissed their doom, and Pitch held the axe there for at least thirty seconds, letting the light scour them out of existence.

When he was done, he wrenched the axe out of the metal and turned slowly, concentrating. Jack knew he was sensing for remaining shadows, but Jack was sure there wouldn't be any. Pitch hadn't sensed them earlier and it seemed that the real test here were the illustrations of Seraphina. The Nightmare King had obviously hoped that Pitch would be too shocked to do anything about them, let alone make his light.

The Nightmare King hadn't expected Pitch to remember Pemberton, Jack was sure. And Jack had a horrible image of the Nightmare King's true intentions – that Pitch would simply one day need to

escape, go to a small wooden cabin in a remote region of the world, and be paralysed by what he'd seen, ripe for the taking.

Jack took Pitch by the wrist and dragged him back outside again, away from the house. Pitch crunched over leaf litter and twigs, walking like someone who was drunk.

They walked until Jack smelled fresh water, heard the trickling of a little brook. The cabin was far away when they came to a mossy bank by a copse of ancient, giant karri trees cloaked by cool shadow. Frogs chirruped and chirped nearby. A dragonfly hovered over the water, looking for somewhere to lay her eggs. Pitch dropped his axe, and Jack dropped his staff alongside it.

Pitch sat, knees bent underneath him, and bowed over. Jack curled up alongside him and placed a hand on his back. Pitch's hands touched the forest floor, a tiny dapple of sunlight turning the grey-olive of his little finger into paleness.

'I hate this,' Jack said, and Pitch nodded. 'He's trying to destroy you.'

'I *had* noticed,' Pitch said, voice arch, despite being strained.

'Don't let him,' Jack whispered, and Pitch laughed, voice breaking.

'That's the thing, Jack. I *was* destroyed. He's just reminding me *why*.'

Pitch's hands clenched in the soil, and he took several deep, shuddering breaths. Jack wrapped his arms around Pitch and squeezed hard. Pitch exhaled in shock, and then managed the smallest breath of laughter.

'You're too warm for this,' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head stubbornly.

A tiny blue fairy wren hopped from branch to branch on a shrub nearby. A black and white magpie with red eyes and a fierce beak carolled a sweet call instead of a rough caw, and several other magpies carolled along with it, before they flew away. Several more azure fairy wrens, with tails more blue than should be possible, flitted around them, before flying up higher into the karri canopy itself.

It was private, idyllic. Jack wondered what it was like in winter. He wanted to come back. He hoped Pitch would be able to come back.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said, softly. 'For this. For making her out of the frost. You weren't supposed to see her when you were lucid. It was the worst part of the plan, even Gwyn asked if it was necessary. You know something is bad when Gwyn checks if we have to do it.'

'It was necessary,' Pitch said, voice hoarse.

'I'm still sorry,' Jack said, and Pitch brought a warm hand up to Jack's back and ran his hand down it. Jack stiffened. Sometimes he was certain that Pitch sought out his scars without even really thinking about it. Pitch's hand paused.

'I don't want it to be true. After all this time, I simply don't want it to be true. That this flesh knows something my mind does not. That my body was made to do *that*,' Pitch broke off, a tortured sound escaping his throat. 'I live in terror that one day I'll remember. I don't think I'd survive it.'

*Me either.*

‘You’ve never really grieved for her, have you?’ Jack said, and Pitch laughed a bitter, caustic sound.

‘Yes. Do tell me how *you* would do it. Knowing your hands likely squeezed her out of existence, *tormented* her. Tell me how you would *grieve* that.’

Tears sprang to Jack’s eyes.

‘Pitch,’ Jack whispered, ‘is there anything he didn’t take from you?’

‘Stop it,’ Pitch snarled, and Jack crawled closer.

‘Anything at all?’

‘*Stop.*’

But Pitch’s voice was breaking, and he reached up and pressed a dirt-stained hand to his eyes once more.

‘I’m so tired,’ Pitch said, shuddering. But he suppressed his tears before they could turn into sobs, and he stared instead at the water running and bubbling in the brook. His eyes cleared of wetness, and his golden gaze was numb as he took in the water. ‘I can’t imagine any of this being over. I actually *cannot*.’

‘You’ve spent your entire life fighting them,’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

‘I was born for it. What will I do when they’re gone? Golden Warriors only exist, *only* exist, to fight the living darkness.’

‘Huh, wow, you never really stopped having that existential crisis, huh?’

Pitch smiled tightly at Jack. Jack offered a sympathetic smile in return, and leaned so that his back was against him, folding Pitch’s hands against his own. He looked out at the water, and then into the tree-line. In the distance he saw the shapes of small kangaroos grazing.

‘Your centre isn’t fear anymore,’ Jack said and Pitch sighed.

‘All this talk of centres...’ Pitch said. ‘It’s taken me a long enough time to even believe that I have one at all. North and Gwyn were most convincing.’

‘We’ve both had our centres shaken up. But I think yours is starting to settle. And I’m starting to get a sense of mine.’

‘Are you?’ Pitch said, surprised.

‘Yeah, I mean I want to wait and see if I’m right before saying anything, but I think I’m kind of happy with it. I think if I’m right, it’ll be a good centre for children. But, more importantly, for me.’

Pitch’s arm curled around Jack’s ribs and leaned back against the bole of a karri tree, and his breath evening.

‘I keep thinking you should be more upset,’ Jack said. ‘More emotional outbursts, or something.’

‘Do you?’ Pitch said, amused. ‘I had an awfully long time on my own after the Each Uisge stole the shadows from me. I idled down in that lair, struck down with memories, despair, a sword I’d

forgotten about, items I'd carefully collected in order to hang onto a self that I no longer knew what to do with. You do not think I had my moments, down there? Believe me, Jack, when I say that a great deal of damage done to that lair was thanks entirely to myself. I have always been far better at smashing out my rage, than I have been at finding my grief.'

'Yeah, but, with what the Nightmare King is doing now...'

Pitch tightened his arm around Jack's ribs. Jack reached up and rubbed sweat off his cheeks, off the back of his neck. He closed his eyes and summoned a curl of cold, that it might shiver through his body and lower his body temperature. It worked, and Pitch shivered in turn.

'S'hot,' Jack explained.

'If you *really* wanted to, you could turn this whole forest into ice,' Pitch drawled, and Jack touched the leaf-litter under his hands.

'I couldn't. I'm meant to be keeping that side of things under wraps. And I figured with the shadows gone, we weren't staying here long. I just wanted to...make sure you were okay. And enjoy it. I like this place. You have a thing for forests, huh?'

'We didn't have many where I come from, and I like them now.'

'You didn't have *forests*?' Jack said, horrified.

'I said we didn't have *many*. Honestly, you and your listening skills, Jack.'

'Hey, I listen plenty,' Jack grumped, then turned his head into Pitch's robe. 'I wish you'd talk more about Seraphina. I know there are reasons why you can't, but she's special to me too, you know.'

'You don't talk to me about Jamie,' Pitch said. 'I've asked. We all have our grievances that can only come up when they do, Jack.'

Jack placed his hand over Pitch's, where it wrapped around the curve of his ribs. Frost spooled out of his fingers and onto Pitch's hand and wrist, cooling his own hand in the process.

'I *hate* the Nightmare King,' Jack said. 'How much of this, how much everything, is because of him? Because of those shadows?'

Fear grew within him, and Pitch tensed. Jack remembered another time that he was surrounded by the body of Pitch, but the Nightmare King had been using it, had used it *against* him. He tried not to think about it, but it still crept in.

'He used the shadows against me,' Jack said, shuddering. 'That's what he started with. He knew. I've never experienced it like you have, but just feeling them in that gymnasium... It was the *worst*. When Gwyn told me that August had a fear of being possessed by the shadows, and that he was going to do that to him, it made me feel sick, honestly. Because yeah, that's what you feel like, you know? You feel like you'd do *anything* just to make them stop. *Anything*. I mean, I'm not telling you anything you don't know, alright? I know that, but-'

'Actually,' Pitch said, taking a deep breath, 'it's different for the spirits on this Earth. We invite the shadows into us willingly, in initiation. And we were born to. It's very different. Will you...continue, please?'

Jack felt the embroidery of Pitch's robe against his cheek and sighed. Nearby, a tiny brown and green frog plinked into the brook, then started croaking.



‘The Nightmare King started with that. I only ever got one nightmare from him, but it was enough. And I woke up in the dream – you know how you can do that? – in Kostroma, can you imagine? And *you* were there, and it was warm, and it was like- It was like that time I woke up and was warmed through and you know? You remember? And I didn’t realise straight away. I just knew that you were back and I was upset. I just wanted to...’

Jack stopped, and Pitch’s other arm folded around Jack. He hesitantly rested his chin on top of Jack’s head, and Jack found he could tolerate that, so he turned his mind to the dream again.

‘He used the words against me. You know. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’ He used it to, to promise me he was gonna stick around. And I was mad. He always knew exactly where to *push*. He told me that my greatest fear had already happened – you know, he laughed about it. And until then I hadn’t really considered it – that you disappearing like that, just after I got to be with you, was such a big fear – but he was right. And you were gone, and one of my greatest fears *had* come true. Because you were there, but *you* couldn’t see me, and I was invisible all over again.’

Jack’s voice choked, and he shook his head, frustrated.

‘I got so mad at him in the dream.’

‘You did?’ Pitch said, surprised.

‘Ha, yeah. I insulted him a ton. That part was actually great. That was how I was able to force him out of my head, I think. That and the ice.’

Pitch stiffened.

‘*You* did that?’

‘What?’

‘*I remember* that,’ Pitch gasped, shifting Jack so that he could look him in the eyes. ‘I remember feeling his rage, or outrage, and then being aware that if I could feel what *he* was feeling, I was myself again. That was often how it happened. And then there was a burst of cold, and frost lightning. For a moment I thought you’d come to save me.’

Jack stared at him.

‘So it was real? It was the thing that pushed him out of my mind?’

‘I don’t know how,’ Pitch said. ‘You’ve never been as scared of him as he wanted you to be. Scared of what he could *do*, but not scared of *him*. And the living shadows grow stronger on fear and terror – if you deprive them of it, it does weaken them.’

Pitch smiled, lopsided.

Jack stared at him, then bit his lower lip. He crawled off Pitch’s lap and sat cross-legged on the ground, placing both of his hands together and letting frost spiral over both of his hands to keep his temperature down.

Sometimes when he looked at Pitch, he wanted to say something about his time with August, but he was used to shoving that instinct down. Now, he thought, in a place so separate from the rest of their lives, with the benefit of Sandy’s dreams that he never remembered...

‘Can I tell you about it?’ Jack said, and Pitch nodded automatically. Jack realised that Pitch knew

what Jack was talking about; he could read Jack's fear of it.

'You can stop at any point,' Pitch said, and Jack nodded. He knew that now.

'Yeah...okay. Can you tell me what you've picked up? I know you've picked things up, because you don't- You haven't- You haven't seemed more upset that I can't do things like go down on you anymore.'

Pitch grimaced at the same time that Jack cringed at his own words.

'Firstly,' Pitch said, 'it's not 'anymore,' it's just 'for now.' Your fears aren't static, and even if it takes ten or twenty years – which I *doubt* – it's not a 'forever' fear. And, secondly, I...yes. I saw a flash of that. The briefest snapshot. I do not know how long it lasted. As for what else I know, aside from how he ruined certain gestures of comfort for you? I do not know exactly how he did that, only that he did. And I know that you have a fear of being grabbed by the wrist or body and pulled somewhere, that your fear of drowning is stronger than it was before, and that you are terrified of the compulsions. I know that you were bitten badly, both when he was a waterhorse and when he was in his human-form.'

Jack had bent his knees up to his chest, and wrapped his arms around them. He rested his chin on his knee and stared at Pitch.

'I mean, yeah, that's...'

Hearing it like that made Jack feel like hardly anything had happened to him, and he flushed, embarrassed. Pitch narrowed his eyes.

'Jack, you can minimise it as much as you like, but the fact remains that no matter what happened, you were especially vulnerable to it, because of your aloneness. Will you...will you tell me?'

Jack pushed his forehead into his knees.

'I was looking for a place to test the weapons to defeat the Nightmare King. Kind of hopeful that my plan might work. The fact that we had a plan at all was a really big deal. The Nightmare King it turns out is not easy to defeat, especially when he's even more powerful thanks to the Nain Rouge. I was caught. And dragged underwater. I couldn't- He wouldn't let me fight him. I couldn't fight the compulsions. And he kept making fun of me for it.'

Jack made a sound and dug his fingers into his legs.

'He just kept making fun of me for it. That other spirits would have been able to fight back, and that I was just weak and pathetic because I couldn't fight them *at all*. And then he said that I wasn't even *trying* to fight him, and I was, Pitch. I *was*. But when he said it like that, he made me wonder if maybe I just... He made me undress in front of him, after he got me to discharge my power, and Pitch, I didn't have much power left. I was *dying*. When he asked me to do that, I honestly thought it might kill me.

'He talked about destroying your locket, but didn't, thank god. And he made me taste my own blood, which was *great*.'

Pitch made a sound of disgust and horror. His body shifted, as though he wanted to move towards Jack, and then he stopped and maintained the distance that Jack had created between them. Jack was grateful, he didn't think he could handle being touched.

'And *then* he bit me and...ate it, which...has put me off a lot of things, I think. Anything that

sounds like chewing, actually. It bled a lot, that wound, and he got angry that it wasn't icing up, and then asked me to ice it up and you know, I *couldn't*. I had no power left!

Jack realised he felt angry, was surprised at himself. He hadn't felt much anger at all, over what had happened, always defaulting to fear or loss. But remembering Augus' impatience with him, it made a flash of icy anger move through him.

'Anyway that was around when he...made me, you know, do the thing that you got an image of. I can't really talk about that. It didn't last long. Like, not long at all. It was too cold for him, and so he had to change what he was doing. He let me get dressed, asked me what we were planning, you know? That was the only compulsion I could fight against. I blew a blood vessel in my eye doing it, but I just couldn't give him the plan that might get you back. I don't know how I did it. I wish I could've done it against his other compulsions, maybe I could've gotten away.'

'Maybe,' Pitch said, 'but you've always valued the life of others over your own, and it makes perfect sense to me that you'd be able to resist a compulsion on someone else's behalf, to save *them*, but not for yourself. As sad as that makes me.'

Jack didn't say anything for a long time, turning those words over in his head. When he looked up, Pitch's eyes were sheened with tears. But Jack himself didn't feel much of anything except a vague anger and queasiness.

'He compelled me to tell him what you did that I liked. And Pitch, they were *our* things. You putting your hands in my hair. Or...looking after me, after a bad dream. They were *our* things. And Gwyn was attacking the dome and it was going to hell and really he didn't actually have me for very long at all, but I'd never had comfort like what you'd offered to me before, not *ever*, not even – I'm pretty sure – when I was human.'

Jack dashed away tears.

'So, well, then I didn't even get away, but he compelled me to leave and *tell* the Nightmare King about it. Gwyn broke that compulsion. I passed out. We all thought I was dead at that point. Discharging my power like that when I knew I didn't have long. I guess...' Jack sighed quietly. 'Look, it wasn't much.'

'Wasn't it?' Pitch said, voice flat, dangerous. 'Much more, and there would have been nothing of you left. To take a spirit already so close to being broken by his circumstances... To do *that* to him.'

'He just kept telling me how weak I was, and the whole time, the compulsions and the insults and just...on top of everything else. I really *hate* compulsions.'

Jack straightened his legs which were starting to ache.

'I feel like I didn't really tell you much,' Jack said, and Pitch's lips quirked upwards.

'You told me more than perhaps you realise. A story is always different on every retelling.'

Jack pressed his hands to his sternum. He felt ill, unsettled, but he didn't feel as bad as he thought he would. And the huge spike of fear he'd felt when he'd started talking about it had dissipated. He couldn't tell if it was the setting, the timing, if Sandy's dreams actually were starting to help, if it was just that he'd been getting better without even realising. He took a deep breath and sighed it out, then looked at Pitch and found himself moving back over to his side.

'Kostroma? The Workshop?' Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

‘No, we can stay here a bit longer. If you want. Unless you want to get the hell out of here. Which wouldn’t surprise me.’

Pitch bent down and kissed Jack’s forehead.

‘Let’s stay a little longer.’

He had come so close to losing Pitch so many times, in different ways. He’d come so close to dying himself, more than once. They’d almost lost everything, and for a little while there, Jack was convinced he had. Talking about the nightmare had – oddly – disturbed him more than talking about his encounter with Augus.

Jack grabbed onto the collar of Pitch’s robe and pulled himself up, pressing his lips clumsily to Pitch’s.

Pitch placed his hands on Jack’s shoulders and pushed lightly, and Jack bit onto Pitch’s lower lip as he was pushed back, scraping his teeth over his lip until he had to let go.

‘Why are we stopping?’ Jack said, and Pitch gazed at him. He felt like Pitch was looking for something in Jack’s expression. He had no idea if Pitch would find it, but he stared back hungrily, hoping desperately that Pitch didn’t shut him down.

Pitch had said that he wanted Jack to come to him wanting, not forcing himself to do anything. Jack wanted him.

Pitch’s eyes widened. He dragged Jack back to him, opening his mouth as Jack’s lips touched his. Pitch slid his tongue inside, sinking heat into the coolness of him until Jack moaned. He pulled Jack closer, until Jack’s legs fell either side of Pitch’s and he braced himself on Pitch’s chest.

Jack slid his hands into Pitch’s robe, beneath his undershirt until he had the heat of Pitch’s skin against his palms. He groaned into Pitch’s mouth. Pitch dragged the sharp edges of his teeth down the side of Jack’s neck, licked over the marks he made. He dragged the side of Jack’s hoodie down, biting wetly at skin before latching his mouth to his collarbone and sucking so hard that Jack gasped.

Pitch fisted the drawstrings of Jack’s hoodie and then pushed Jack back until he rested on soft ground and Pitch crowded over him. Pitch used the drawstrings to pull Jack’s sweatshirt down, licking stripes across his cold skin. The heat was getting to Jack and he felt dizzy.

Pitch roughly pushed up Jack’s sweatshirt, looking at Jack briefly before placing his mouth directly over part of the bite-mark scar on his ribs. Jack hissed at him, pushed his fingers into Pitch’s hair.

‘You just can’t help yourself, can you?’

Pitch laughed darkly against his skin and licked his way into Jack’s navel, before pressing persistent, hungry kisses up to Jack’s nipples, catching one with his fingernails and the other with his mouth, unafraid to scrape with teeth, flicking his tongue over the nub. Jack arched beneath him, reminded himself not to pull Pitch’s hair too hard.

Jack wondered if Pitch felt it too. They’d both come so close to losing each other. There was a desperation to Pitch’s movements that lacked the carefulness he’d shown in the past. When Pitch surged up and sealed his mouth over Jack’s, it was a forceful, demanding kiss.

Pitch lifted up, stared down at him, and Jack focused on catching his breath.

'I've missed this,' Pitch said, voice hoarse, and Jack opened his mouth to agree, when he felt Pitch stroke the inside of his thigh with a firm hand, forcing his legs apart. He didn't tease, cupping Jack's balls through the material of his pants, then moving his hand up and palming the shape of him.

'I want you,' Jack said, pressing his hips up into Pitch's hand. 'I'm ready. I'm ready, you know that, right?'

Pitch licked his lips hungrily, and then he burst out laughing. Jack stared at him, and Pitch shook his head in dismay, still pressing his hand mercilessly against Jack's cock.

'That's wonderful news, Jack, but you could have possibly saved this for a time when I had *lubricant*.'

Jack slammed his head back into the floor. He didn't want to go somewhere else. He wanted it to be here, with the brook nearby and the frogs croaking and even the hideous warmth.

'What about inside the cabin?' Jack said. 'I could get it.'

'Mm,' Pitch said, shaking his head. 'Kostroma may have had a decent supply, but Pemberton, alas, does not. Shall we go back to Kostroma and continue this there?'

Pitch moved his hand against Jack meaningfully over Jack's pants. It brought a pleasure-pain that left Jack whining.

Pitch paused so that Jack could gather his thoughts, and Jack found that he didn't want to leave. Not yet. It shocked him, he had been so sure, in that instant, that he was *ready*. But now that he had a choice, and they could go to Kostroma, Jack was suddenly afraid that he wasn't as ready as he'd thought he was.

Jack blinked up at Pitch and grimaced.

'Can we stay?' Jack said, and Pitch nodded at him.

'Don't want it after all?'

'I want...to want it,' Jack said, wincing.

'I know what you mean,' Pitch whispered, and caught Jack's lips in a tender, lingering kiss. Warm breath moved against his cheek where Pitch exhaled. Fingers stroked the side of his jaw with a care that made Jack shift into a different gear. His mind cleared, and he reached up with and touched fingertips to the sides of Pitch's face, finding the hollows underneath his cheekbones and caressing them.

'So this is okay?' Jack said against Pitch's lips.

Pitch shifted the hand between Jack's legs so that fingers slipped between the fabric, and grazed down his skin. Jack's eyes widened in surprise, he held his breath, felt paralysed when Pitch took him in hand.

'Uh,' Jack said, and Pitch smiled against his mouth.

'This is more than okay,' Pitch said, squeezing his flesh, moving his hand up and down with a slow, intimate concentration that made Jack's focus scatter.

Jack tilted his head back, stared at tree-trunks and shafts of sunlight, at blue-violet shadows and glimpses of a sere blue sky. He inhaled and exhaled with the movements of Pitch's palm, and then lifted his hips helpfully when Pitch removed his pants. Pitch shifted above him, and Jack looked back down again, to see Pitch licking his own palm, wetting it.

Jack reached for Pitch's wrist and drew his hand to his mouth. He couldn't make eye contact as he licked his fingers, wetting them with his cooler saliva. He couldn't take Pitch's fingers into his mouth anymore, which sparked a pang of regret, but he could do this much, and that would have to be okay. Besides, from the way Pitch was reacting, it was more than okay. Pitch's hand trembled as Jack licked a long, wet stripe up the centre of his palm. Jack did again and again, until Pitch shivered.

Pitch withdrew his hand, shifting his own pants down, before pressing his length against Jack's with a fluid surge of movement.

'This is going to mess up my hoodie,' Jack gasped, and Pitch licked the underside of his exposed neck.

'We can't have that now, can we?' Pitch said, cupping his slick palm over the heads of both of them, grazing them both and sparking sensations that crept up Jack's torso. Jack made an uncertain eye contact with Pitch, then offered a shy smile, which made Pitch's hand falter against him.

'Jack,' Pitch whispered, then kissed him gently. He kept his hand loosely around both of them, four of his warm fingers around Jack's shaft, and only his thumb hooking around himself. He wasn't moving, but it didn't matter. Jack was overwhelmed by what they were doing. He didn't know people did things like this. That two people could cry, be upset and then do this afterwards. It seemed like cheating, somehow, to find something that felt so good so close to something that hurt.

'I forget,' Pitch said, moving his hand around them both, grinding his hips down into Jack's, opening his mouth at Jack's broken cry as though he could drink it down. 'I forget how new this is to you. It's okay to not trust it yet, Jack. That will come.'

Jack looped his arm around the back of Pitch's neck, closed his eyes. Hearing Pitch speak his fears aloud left him feeling exposed. He pushed his face into Pitch's neck and hid there, wishing that he didn't feel as though he was spilling all over. One moment it had been rough and fast and fun, like the old days before the Guardians. Now it was frightening, it opened a space in his chest that burnt with a warmth that reminded him of Pitch's skin.

Pitch moved over him, using his knees to propel his slow, rhythmic slides against Jack's cock. Jack focused on Pitch's breathing, which was worn but steady, an anchor to hold onto. He kept his face hidden despite the fact that he felt like he was burning up. He felt like he was stealing something that didn't belong to him.

Small syllables of sound started falling from his mouth, and Pitch turned his head into Jack's, pressing his nose against the side of Jack's head. He licked the shell of Jack's ear, and then scraped his teeth over Jack's earlobe, making him moan sharply. Jack's head tilted back as he tried to get a deeper breath of air, and Pitch moved his lips over Jack's so he could capture his cries, swallowing them so that they hummed into Pitch's mouth.

Pitch continued moving against him. It was an intimate, steady rhythm, and all the more disarming because of it. Jack couldn't distract himself with anything else, couldn't do anything but be present. He couldn't get enough air, he felt surrounded, drowning in warmth. Pitch's hand was clever over the both of them.

It really wasn't going to take much.

He tried to break away from Pitch's mouth to tell him he was close, but Pitch followed his movement down to the forest floor, where he kept Jack's head still with his own, tongue moving in his mouth in time to the movement of his hands.

Tension spiralled tightly inside of him, and Jack's cries broke into silence. He inhaled sharply through his nose and his hips arched up, looking for more friction. And in that moment, Pitch drove his hips down into Jack's, answering with a pressure that – along with the fingers that snagged the head of his cock, tripped him into a peak that was almost painful. He shouted against Pitch's mouth, coming hard, Pitch's hand catching the spurts of cold, white fluid and tightening his grip around the both of them, moving quickly now, driving after his own pleasure.

Jack was too sensitive, too hot, and he exhaled a long, broken moan when Pitch kept moving against him, relentless.

'Pitch, *please*,' Jack whimpered, and Pitch hissed above him. His hand tightened around them both. Jack winced, and then he reached up and trailed fingertips carrying frost down Pitch's cheek as Pitch came into his own hand.

Pitch's eyes snapped open. He stared at Jack as a spiral of frost curled around the sharpness of his cheekbone. Jack managed a pained smile and Pitch gazed at him, riding out the intensity of his own release. It was only when he was done, when his breath was shuddering out of him, that he was able to return Jack's smile, release the pressure he'd viced around the both of them.

'Apologies,' Pitch said, when he realised how tightly he was gripping him. Jack shook his head.

'I...kind of like it,' Jack said, and then tucked his head into Pitch's neck again, embarrassed.

Pitch laughed, a dark, confident sound.

He pushed himself off Jack and then looked at the dripping mess of his hand. He stood up, stepped over to the current of running water.

'How convenient,' Pitch said, kneeling beside the brook and rinsing his hands off. Jack slowly pushed himself upright.

'Was that just really inappropriate?' Jack said, pulling his pants up awkwardly as Pitch flicked water off his hands. Pitch smoothed his robes as though this was the sort of thing he did every day.

'Jack, do you really want *appropriate*?'

There was a playful edge to Pitch's half-smile, and Jack returned it.

'I guess not.'

'We deal with life the way we deal with it. Now, I believe I have sounded like enough Hallmark cards today, and I'm starting to get sick of it. Let's go and see who we can harass back at the Workshop.'

Pitch's smile turned positively impish, and Jack poked him with his staff as he picked it up. Pitch's expression turned innocent, and he tugged on the drawstrings of Jack's hoodie.

'As hard as all of this is, I'm glad you're here with me,' Pitch said, and Jack snorted at him, in spite of the frisson of pleasure that moved through him at the words.

‘Yeah, you really *do* sound like a Hallmark card.’

‘We can’t all go around sounding like three hundred year old teenagers,’ Pitch said, bending down and picking up his axe. Pitch opened his other arm, inviting, and Jack smiled at him.

Jack pressed his body against Pitch and realised – as they flew through shadows back to the Workshop – that he hadn’t tensed when Pitch’s arms had closed around him. He smiled, stayed in Pitch’s arms for a few minutes more when they landed, taking advantage of the unexpected peace he felt.

He was learning to savour it when it happened.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'One of Us,' Pitch let's Gwyn know what he's decided about joining the Seelie Court, and his new centre is revealed. And Pitch and Jack travel to the Nightmare King's underground lair, to put an end to the last of the living shadows once and for all. If only things would always go to plan...



# One Of Us

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your comments and subscriptions and bookmarks and kudos. They mean so much! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack was frosting the windowpanes of North's Workshop, when Pitch found him a few days later. He appeared in the shadows in an alcove beside Jack, who startled and staggered backwards, pointing his staff at Pitch accusingly.

'Not cool,' Jack said, and then laughed. 'You got me.'

'I *did*,' Pitch said, a wicked grin turning his face puckish.

'You idiot, you're going to be doing that for the rest of my life, aren't you?'

Jack froze as soon as he said it. His eyes flew open, and he raised his hand in shock.

'Uh, I meant-'

What if Pitch didn't want to spend the rest of his life with Jack? What if Jack didn't want to spend the rest of his life with *Pitch*?

Pitch's shock melted into an amused expression, and he shrugged.

'That's the plan,' Pitch said, then dragged a fingertip through one of the frosted windowpanes, melting the frost.

Jack felt relieved that his words hadn't led to a 'serious conversation about commitment.' He felt a small burst of soothing cold in his chest that Pitch indicated that he was happy to stay with Jack like that, so easily. At some point, Jack would have to say something like, 'Hey, I want to build my home near Kostroma or something,' but he didn't want to have that conversation today.

'I came to ask you something,' Pitch said, and then smiled as he kept dragging his finger through the frost. 'But now that I'm here, I can't help but remember another time I surprised you while you were icing up windowpanes.'

Jack shivered. That last time, they'd both ended up in Kostroma with Pitch helping Jack discover things about his body that Jack didn't even know were possible.

'You really don't think of anything else, do you?' Jack said, and Pitch's smile turned into a smirk.

'I'll be serious though, shall I? For just a moment. Can you get in contact with our serious Seelie King, so I can tell him – and I'm *sure* I'm going to regret this at some point – that I am going to join his Court?'

Jack shook his head, taking out the blue rod of metal that he now carried with him wherever he went. It felt strange, having a constant way of contacting Gwyn. Even stranger, now that he wasn't

seeing Gwyn every day, sometimes he actually missed him. He wondered if Gwyn would be upset if Jack ever summoned him just to say hi.

‘You *are* going to regret it. He’s probably got this big scheme or something where you end up working for him in some sort of unpaid slave labour, but hey, don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

‘As frustrating as he can be, Gwyn is fae, he cares about squaring his debts. In all honesty, I would like to have a purpose. I’m not a person well-suited to a life of leisure or daytime television. It is obvious that I’m not going to be a Guardian any time soon, since I do not actually *care* about children. But I care about the fae, enough that I could perhaps be bothered to drag myself upright and fight for them, on occasion.’

‘Yeah, slave labour, I knew it.’

Jack held the blue rod of metal, closed his eyes and concentrated. He had no idea how it worked or how easily he could reach Gwyn across great distances. He mentally called Gwyn’s name, then mentioned that Pitch was on board with the whole Seelie thing and left it at that.

‘Okay, who knows if that’ll work,’ Jack said, sighing.

‘How will you know?’

‘I won’t know. Not only that, but he won’t always come. He just said to try again later if it doesn’t work the first time. Busy guy, and all that.’

Pitch nodded, and Jack realised that Pitch was writing his name into Jack’s frost. He got as far as P-I-T, before Jack iced it all up again, and then prodded Pitch with his staff for good measure.

‘Stop messing up my frost,’ Jack said, and Pitch stared at Jack with a contrite look at his face, even as he stuck his arm out and dragged a finger – very deliberately – through the frost again.

‘Really,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes, ‘you are the *worst*.’

Pitch laughed.

\*

It turned out that Jack had to ‘try again later’ when it came to summoning Gwyn, another three times. It wasn’t until the next morning, when Pitch was honing the edge of his axe on a sharpening block outside and Jack was making snowmen in the shape of yeti that Gwyn arrived. The overcast, snowy space glowed with white light as he appeared. Jack looked over from his snowman and waved casually, and then pointed over at Pitch.

‘He wanted you.’

‘When I said try again later, I meant perhaps give it a day or two. Every few hours is incessant. It’s very distracting to be in the middle of disembowelling someone on a battlefield, only to hear your voice in my head talking about that ‘Seelie thing.’’

Jack made a face at the snowman. He hadn’t considered that Gwyn might be out in battle still.

‘Gotcha. Why are you always fighting things?’

Gwyn sighed.

‘There are thousands of different species of fae, and within those species, a lot of territorial land

disputes that often end in bloodshed. My presence on the field often minimises battle. And when it doesn't, I tend to get things finished quickly. I suppose we must find *some* way to pass the time. I don't know if you've noticed, but we do tend to be Unseelie versus Seelie a great deal of the time. Our entire governing system is organised around tension and conflict.'

'You sound so happy about that,' Pitch said, and Gwyn chuckled, turning to him.

'Is it true? You have decided to join the Seelie Court?'

Jack leaned casually against the snow yeti and watched, curious. Jack caught a second of an excited grin on Gwyn's face, before it was mastered into a more serious expression befitting the occasion.

'What do I have to do?' Pitch said, and Gwyn shook his head.

'Nothing, this part is simple. This is not about ritual, but about words.'

Gwyn paused, and tilted his head to the side.

'Are you very sure?' he said, and Pitch cleared his throat, impatiently.

'Yes,' he said, 'I have given it some thought.'

'That's good, very good. You have considered my offer seriously then and you are willing to go through with it?'

*The man's already given you an answer, what more do you want?* Jack frowned. But Pitch grinned with sudden understanding.

'Oh, I see. Bound by the old laws, are you? You need your three answers? *Yes.*'

Gwyn took a deep breath and sighed it out.

'You should feel a slight shift in your internal power, not much. This is the simple part: I, Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the Seelie Court and its Kingdom, hereby attribute the status of Capital fae, along with all the privileges that this entails, to one Pitch Black.'

Jack expected the ceremony to be far grander than that. And he expected *something* to happen. But the energy around them didn't shift at all. A moment later, Gwyn's shoulders sagged.

'It didn't work,' he said. 'You didn't feel anything?'

'A light breeze,' Pitch said, unhelpfully.

'It should have worked. It shouldn't matter if you are not fae. I checked in the old lore. You didn't- You don't by any chance go by another name, do you?'

Jack stiffened, pushed himself away from the yeti, staring at Pitch.

*No way.*

'This body has carried three names, really, that have *stuck*,' Pitch said, looking uncertain. 'The Nightmare King, Boogeyman – detestable though that is, and Kozmotis Pitchiner.'

Gwyn's eyes narrowed in turn. A half-smile crept upon his face, and he nodded slowly.

'Then I suppose you aren't as divorced from that history of yours as you always swore you were,'

Gwyn said. 'Which doesn't surprise me. But, no matter, it's easy enough to test.'

Gwyn cleared his throat, and Pitch shot a furtive, apprehensive look in Jack's direction. Jack was pretty sure that his face held exactly the same expression on it. Because if this *worked*...

'I, Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the Seelie Court and its Kingdom, hereby attribute the status of Capital fae, along with all the privileges that this entails, to one General Kozmotis Pitchiner.'

Pitch gasped, took two steps backwards. A flurry of wind swirled around them, eldritch and faint, smelling of flowers and water and the sweetness of spring sunlight. Pitch's wide eyes glowed brighter for several seconds, and then faded to their usual gold. Pitch straightened, pressed his own hands to his ribs, and then looked at his fingers, shocked.

'That's the name the magic recognises,' Gwyn said, looking between Jack and Pitch. 'I think you both know what that means.'

Pitch looked faintly horrified.

Jack walked up to him, tentatively touched the back of his hand. He wondered if it would feel any different to touch him; if there'd be glamour there now, or something, but he felt exactly the same.

'I still prefer calling you Pitch,' Jack said, and Pitch nodded absently. 'You've been through a lot since then. It's kind of your name now.'

Pitch squeezed Jack's hand tightly. He offered Jack a tense smile, then turned to Gwyn, who was watching the exchange curiously.

'I have to take you back to the Seelie Court *very* briefly, just to make sure everything worked as it should have worked, and introduce you to the Court, which mostly involves drawing you into the throne room, announcing you, and then watching you try and escape the fae who will flock to you in droves to thank you for all that you've done.'

'You have *got* to be kidding me,' Pitch said flatly.

'I wish that I were,' Gwyn said, and with that, he stepped forwards and grasped Pitch by the arm, and they both dissolved into light.

Jack stared in shock. His last glimpse was Pitch's expression of dissatisfaction as he disappeared into rays of spectacular light.

'Oh, *come on!*' Jack shouted at the space that Gwyn and Pitch had occupied. 'Seriously?'

Jack waited impatiently for ten minutes, and then picked up Pitch's axe with both hands – swearing at its weight – while trying to keep a hold of his staff with two fingers. He flew awkwardly up towards Pitch's room, accidentally knocking a giant gash into the windowsill as he dragged it through. He dropped it unceremoniously onto Pitch's bed, and made a sound of frustration in the back of his throat.

He clasped the blue rod of metal that Gwyn had given him and crawled into Pitch's armchair. He didn't feel any sort of remorse as he mentally told Gwyn off for seizing Pitch like that without giving either of them any warning. He amused himself by imagining Gwyn in the Seelie Court, likely annoyed beyond reason and unable to do very much about it.

*Seriously, Gwyn, I was alone for three hundred years and even I'm better at this stuff than you are.*

He got no reply, and Pitch wasn't back after an hour.

Jack spent the time getting comfortable in the armchair, ending up leaning against one armrest, with both legs over the other side. He wondered how Pitch was faring, and thought about what it might mean that Pitch wasn't some Nightmare King hybrid personality after all, but actually General Kozmotis Pitchiner, trying to distance himself from a past with such fervency that he'd take on a new name.

Jack decided it didn't matter. Pitch was Pitch, no matter what name he'd been born with.

\*

Jack woke with a start. It was dark, and two golden spots of light were focused on him. For a moment he thought it was a wild animal balanced on his tree bough, and then remembered where he was.

Pitch sat on the bed watching him. A moment later, Pitch smiled and his teeth gleamed dully in the light. Jack wondered when he'd gotten back.

'That's creepy,' Jack said, and Pitch nodded.

'I'm aware,' Pitch said.

'So don't just watch me sleep with that creepy smile on your face.'

'I'm afraid I cannot be stopped,' Pitch said, and Jack pushed himself upright into a proper sitting position. Pitch stood up and approached him, and then simply got into the chair, forcing Jack to call wind to himself quickly to get out of the way and resettle on one of the armrests.

'You sound like you're in a good mood. Did it go okay then?'

'A lot of people I'd never met shook my hand or patted me on the shoulder or offered me something to drink, and that's very different from the usual reception I get. I'm not sure if I liked it or not. Then I came back and decided to watch you sleep. Now you know how strange it is. Are you going to stop doing it?'

Jack flushed and then shook his head.

'Nope.'

'Then nor will I.'

'Okay, that's fine, I guess? So, what now? You have like mystical fae powers and...'

'No, actually. Apparently I can make the dra'ocht now if I truly wished to. Beyond that, my physiology is too alien to show any particular changes. I am *quite* incompatible with fae energy, it turns out. Not in a way that is painful or uncomfortable, only that I am much as I always was, and to be honest I prefer it that way. The incompatibility may go some way to explaining why Gwyn found it so difficult to make the golden light, despite being light fae.'

'So,' Jack said, looking up at Pitch's face, at the outline of his nose, his cheekbones. 'Kozmotis, huh?'

'*Pitch*,' he said, in response. His voice was pained.

'But the magic only responded to Kozmotis.'

‘The magic is irredeemably flawed, obviously,’ Pitch said, wry, and then wrapped an arm around Jack.

Jack pushed himself back into Pitch’s body, then trailed his hand along the armchair. When Pitch went back to Kostroma, he wanted the chair to go with him. It was comfortable. It fit the two of them. Besides, North had enough thrones and armchairs, he surely wouldn’t miss it. Jack wondered if Pitch could just teleport it out of there.

Jack looked at Pitch’s hand where it curled against the armrest, then picked it up in both of his hands.

He’d been thinking of this ever since he’d started having the good dreams thanks to Sandy. He never remembered them, but he was noticing a growing resilience. It didn’t erase any of his problems, it didn’t make the loneliness go away, but he felt like he was better able to cope with things when they went wrong.

So, gritting his teeth and bracing himself against his own rush of fear, he raised Pitch’s hand to the top of his head and lowered his palm into his hair.

‘Don’t move it,’ Jack said, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to force the memory of phantom hands away from his thoughts.

Pitch didn’t move at all, held his breath.

Pitch’s hand was warm, stable, a broad weight against the top of his head. Jack didn’t let go of it, ready to jerk it away in a second if he had to. Alongside it were August’s phantom hands, carving awful memories up alongside the good ones, damaging something that had once been pure.

Jack took a quick shallow breath, and then made a small, broken noise.

Pitch went to jerk his hand away, but Jack’s hands tightened.

‘Wait,’ Jack said, and Pitch resisted, moving his hand away.

‘You’re not ready.’

‘I am ready,’ Jack said, reaching, and Pitch kept his hand out of Jack’s grasp.

‘You *want* to be ready. Easy. Take some deep breaths.’

‘I am ready,’ Jack said again, and Pitch shifted away, gave him a look that – even in the darkness – showed narrowed eyes and the downturn of his lips.

Pitch reached out slowly towards Jack’s chest, and Jack tensed further. He could feel the creeping movement of hands in his hair, felt a wave of weakness shudder through him. He swore that, for a moment, he wasn’t wearing his clothing anymore.

Jack jolted when Pitch placed his fingertips against Jack’s chest.

‘Take a deep breath,’ Pitch said, his voice evening out. ‘Just one.’

Jack stared at him, then closed his eyes and dragged in a deeper, shaky breath of air. He exhaled, focusing on the hot points of Pitch’s fingertips against his sweatshirt. He wrapped his hand around Pitch’s hand. He took another breath, then another.

Slowly, the sensation of ghost hands in his hair disappeared, and he bowed his head forwards,

frustrated, a thick, sluggish sadness shifting inside of him.

'I know it doesn't much feel like it, but that still counts as progress,' Pitch said, and Jack grimaced down at Pitch's hand where it was still resting against his chest.

*Whatever.*

'When are we visiting the underground lair?' Jack said, desperate for a change of subject. Pitch sighed, pressed his palm flat against Jack's chest and then ran that hand up to Jack's shoulder, curling his fingers around his back and tugging him forwards until Jack was nestled closer than before.

'Tomorrow,' Pitch said, 'if you're amenable. It's likely to be more difficult than the other places.'

Jack shrugged.

'So we'll do it. The Nightmare King defeated the Nain Rouge, I got rid of the Nightmare King, we all got rid of Augus, I'm pretty sure we can do this.'

It was probably dangerous to feel so confident, but they'd faced off against the shadows three times now and won. Everything Jack had said was true, not bravado.

'I regret ruining the phrase 'I'm not going anywhere.''' Pitch said, and Jack sighed.

'Yeah, well, I regret not visiting you years ago and leaving you down there in the dark all that time, trapped under Augus' compulsion. You hardly ever talk about what that was like for you.'

'Sad. Boring. Long,' Pitch said, and then sighed. 'Also, Jack, I would have been *quite* likely to attack you, in the beginning.'

Jack laughed under his breath. He pressed his face into Pitch's robe and trailed his hand down the embroidery, wondering what all the symbols meant. One day he would ask Pitch to teach him more about where he came from, more about his history. More than one person should know about it, and he wanted to understand.

\*

Before they left, North insisted they spend some time with him. However, when they joined him in North's ice sculpture room, and North proudly presented Pitch with an ice sculpture of *Pitch*, Jack realised that it wasn't just company North had in mind, but congratulations.

Things weren't going to plan.

'Get that *thing* out of my sight!' Pitch shouted, and Jack burst into hapless laughter again.

'It is quite a likeness, I am thinking?' North said, cheerful, and patted Pitch on the shoulder with the kind of force that would send lesser men to the floor. Pitch grit his teeth together and stared at the ice sculpture.

'I have never been more glad that ice melts.'

'Ohhh, yes it does, Pitch, but not *here* in the Workshop! Come, let us celebrate your joining the Seelie fae! We must have something to drink. Come.'

Pitch glared at the ice sculpture as they left, and Jack kept laughing intermittently, because it really had been a good likeness. Complete with scowl, and frown, and towering, threatening pose.

‘I’m going to kill it,’ Pitch said. ‘You all pretend that you’re good and kind Guardians, but really you’re just- You’re...’

North guided him into one of the smaller, more intimate rooms where he sometimes had a nightcap before insomnia forced him down to the reindeer, or into one of his own workrooms again. There, a jug of thick, black coffee rested. Three small, exquisitely painted cups in saucers rested on a low, polished wooden table, in front of three differently sized, different coloured, overstuffed chairs. Jack perched in one and gestured for Pitch to join him.

It wasn’t like they were going to get out of it, North was currently in the habit of managing everything to the point where he’d started managing the Guardians while they were there.

‘I put a lot of time into that sculpture,’ North said with a serious smile, as he sat down and poured everyone coffee. He added small teaspoons of sugar to each cup, heedless of the fact that Pitch said stop before North even started to add the sugar.

Jack was pretty certain by now that North knew exactly how irritating he was being, and enjoying himself far too much. Pitch and North got along, they shared a lot of creative interests, but North enjoyed treating Pitch like a younger, too-serious nephew. Which was ridiculous, since Pitch was older than just about anyone Jack had met.

‘I am thinking that you are getting closer to your new centre,’ North said to Jack, and Jack nodded as he sipped at overly sweetened, thick black coffee that was so strong it scoured a path down the back of his throat. He coughed, and Pitch glared at him in satisfaction. He refused to touch his own cup.

‘Yeah, I think so.’

‘That’s wonderful.’

North downed his coffee in one gulp, and then poured himself another cup.

‘And you, of course, are no longer having centre of fear!’ North said to Pitch, and Pitch sighed in the sort of way that reminded Jack of when Pitch had been deeply unstable. Pitch looked impatient, and Jack knew he wanted to get to the underground lair and finish what the living shadows had started.

‘I don’t hold much with this centre business,’ Pitch said.

‘You have a centre,’ North said. ‘Are you not wishing to know what it is?’

Pitch tapped his fingers on the wooden armrest. Jack turned to Pitch; he’d figured it out himself days earlier, but didn’t know if Pitch could sense it. Pitch had always seemed out of touch with centres and cores of energy. Jack figured it was probably because he’d spent so long with a fractured soul, as a fractured person.

‘I...have no idea what it is. If you know, perhaps you might tell me,’ Pitch said.

His glare had vanished, he looked disturbed.

North chuckled to himself and shook his head.

‘Ah, no, no, no. The fun is in the guessing,’ North said, and Pitch picked up his coffee cup, went to take a sip and then narrowed his eyes at it and set it down again.



*Good call*, Jack thought.

'I have never enjoyed guessing games,' Pitch said, voice flat.

Pitch's eyes narrowed, his brow pulled together. He leaned forwards slightly in his chair, tense. Jack realised, with a shock that Pitch very much wanted to know what his centre was. Jack crouched in his own chair, reached out with a hand and touched Pitch's arm. North looked between the two of them at the sign of affection. But Jack refused to move his hand. Pitch might be intimidated by North, but Jack wasn't.

The corner of North's lips turned up, and his eyes crinkled.

'Just *one* guess,' North said. 'I cannot help it! Pitch, Pitch, you have to be remembering that I am the one who wraps my gifts in colourful paper first, I *like* the part where people guess. It is a part of my magic.'

'Your magic is deeply and gravely irritating,' Pitch said, though there was no venom in his voice.

Pitch looked down at his knees as though he could see the truth of his centre there. Jack stroked his arm gently. He didn't think Pitch would be able to guess. After having a flawed centre of fear for so long, thanks to the living shadows, Jack didn't know how self-perceptive he was now. Especially when it came to reaching the core of himself and seeing what was truly there.

Minutes passed. North and Jack exchanged a look that started off mischievous, and then turned serious. Jack found it difficult, knowing that Pitch was struggling with this so much.

'Is it sacrifice?' Pitch said finally, looking up.

Jack had to look down for a moment, his hand clenched on Pitch's forearm.

*Of course you'd guess that. Oh my god.*

Pitch who sacrificed his time away from his daughter to guard the shadows for everyone else's benefit. Pitch who sacrificed himself believing his daughter was in danger and ended up possessed. Pitch who sacrificed himself *again*, for Jack, only to become the Nightmare King a second time. But it was especially painful, knowing what his centre really was.

'I take it that I'm incorrect,' Pitch said. 'Will you just *tell* me?'

'Hmm,' North leaned forwards. Pitch watched him carefully, apprehensive. 'You are close.'

North looked down at his coffee cup, and then looked over at Jack, who nodded. Pitch would never guess it on his own, and Jack didn't think he should be the one to tell him. North was the Guardian in charge of letting people know their centres once they'd lost their way, and he was good at leading people to the truth.

'Pitch, there are few reasons in this world why people make such great sacrifices as you have. Because it is true, you are very close. You have made *great* sacrifices, and giving up yourself in order to save those that you love, this is being a part of you. But, Pitch, have you not looked deeper, to what motivates someone to give up *everything* for someone else? Have you not considered what lies at the root of your sacrifices for others? Because there...*there* is your centre. It is profound, and true, and a challenge, yes. And it has made you lose so, *so* much.'

Pitch was taut as a wire, his fingertips gripping both armrests. He shook beneath Jack's hand.

‘Pitch,’ North said, voice gentling. ‘Do you not see? No one sacrifices that much – no one ever would – without love.’

Pitch stared at North as though struck. His eyes were wide, face bleached of colour. He looked not happy, or pleased, but *horrified*.

North had obviously expected Pitch to be happy at the revelation, but Pitch’s shaking increased and he looked like he’d rather his centre was *anything* else. Jack made a face at North, who stood quickly, sighed. He pressed a gentle hand to Pitch’s shoulder as he passed him.

‘I am thinking this is private moment.’

As soon as the door closed behind him, Pitch slid off the chair into the small space between the chair legs and the table. Jack wrapped his arms around Pitch’s back, pressed his head to the back of Pitch’s head. Pitch trembled, his shoulders shuddered.

‘He’s wrong,’ Pitch said, and Jack shook his head.

‘I’ve known for a little while.’

‘It can’t be true,’ Pitch said, and Jack slid his hands around Pitch’s ribs, underneath his arms, and squeezed. Pitch was bent double, his voice was wet. Jack closed his eyes when Pitch made a sound of denial that wrenched from a deep place inside of him. Jack stroked him over his ribs.

‘It’s true,’ Jack said. ‘I promise. I’ve seen it myself a hundred times over.’

Pitch curled in on himself until he became a ball of tension, and then he turned in the small space, shoving away the armchair and pulling Jack down into his arms. Jack found himself bundled up, his staff falling out of his grip, and Pitch tucked his body around Jack’s. Fingers dug into his skin through his clothing. It was painful, but Jack was too concerned to care.

‘Why do I have to have a confounded centre that *hurts* so much,’ Pitch said, and Jack murmured soothing, nonsense syllables as Pitch began to cry in earnest.

Jack held onto Pitch, stroked his hair, felt a sharp pain in his chest at the sounds that Pitch was making, at the rawness of his grief. He tightened his arms around Pitch, and Pitch returned the gesture until Jack found it hard to breathe.

Jack reached up with trembling fingers and smoothed away Pitch’s tears, accidentally freezing a few, rubbing the frost away from his face. At that, Pitch chuckled wetly, tucking his head alongside Jack’s.

‘That was humiliating,’ Pitch said, his voice still worn.

Jack looked around the room and managed a weak smile.

‘Which part? The part where we’re lying on the floor by the world’s worst coffee, or the part where North saw you freak out because your centre is love?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, in fervent agreement. ‘And, also, the absolute *cliché* that is love as a centre.’

Jack laughed. Pitch sounded only semi-serious.

‘You’ll get over it.’

Pitch unfolded slowly, stiff, kneeling beside the table. He picked up the cup of coffee absently and

drained it. He made a sound of disgust, but didn't cough as Jack had.

'Cold,' he said, and then sighed, wiping away at the remaining tears that had left tracks down his face. 'Remind me never to tell North that I quite enjoy his coffee. I eat enough cinnamon cookies as it is, I hardly need more sugar in my life.'

Jack got up before Pitch did and helped him up, holding out both of his hands and drawing him upright, before retrieving his staff.

'Love,' Pitch said to himself. 'Really?'

'Yeah,' Jack said, smiling at him.

'I *hate* all of you,' Pitch muttered.

'Yep,' Jack said, and wrapped his arms around him. 'I know you do. I love you though. When you're not being a total pain...and maybe a little bit even when you are.'

It was surprising, how easy it was to say it. There was no huge block in the way, nothing but a small flare of fear that disappeared as soon as the words left his mouth. Pitch tightened his hands against Jack's back, then stepped away.

'Well, Jack, I love you too,' Pitch said, and Jack smiled just as Pitch dramatically rolled his eyes, 'because *apparently* that's my *centre*.'

'Oh my god,' Jack said, poking him with his staff. 'North never should have told you.'

'I want to take it back and return it for something else,' Pitch said, walking from the room. 'Is it too late to exchange it?'

Jack sighed in mock exasperation, and was so busy icing the side of the Workshop walls that he almost missed the tired, affectionate look that Pitch threw in his direction.

\*

It was dark, and there were many shadows.

Pitch teleported them directly into the lair, and Jack could feel them already. Living shadows. He couldn't tell where they were, but it was such a distinctly different feeling to the dead, regular shadows that occupied the world he lived in. Pitch held up his axe and spun it in his grip, looking around.

Above them, a few huge cages still hung. The rest lay smashed around the ground, as did many of the pillars and bridges. Jack remembered Pitch saying that he had done a great deal of the damage to the lair, and that it hadn't been the Nightmare King after all. It was hard to imagine Pitch doing all of this damage, being furious enough to destroy so much.

Warmth pulsed out through the ground; lava somewhere, deep below them. It was uncomfortable, but Jack pulled consciously from his core of cold and kept lowering his body temperature every time it crept too high.

'I really, really don't like this place,' Jack whispered, and Pitch nodded silently. He was still surveying their surroundings.

Jack couldn't see a metallic, rectangular box. The fact that he could feel the shadows himself meant

that perhaps there was no box to find. Maybe they were just hanging around, waiting.

Jack shivered.

‘There’s too many,’ Pitch said under his breath. ‘I’m not sure what will trigger them. I do believe there’s some in my old room, as well. But in here...they’re too high for me to reach, and there’s too many.’

Jack took an involuntary step backwards. Too many shadows. Too many shadows meant that Pitch could be possessed again.

But then he looked at his staff, looked at Pitch’s axe, and had an idea.

‘The snow,’ Jack whispered. ‘The snow with the light in it. S’been a while, right? We could do it again? In here?’

‘Do you still remember how?’

‘Snow is *easy*,’ Jack said.

He flew into the air, calling the snowstorm to him, pouring it out from his own core when it was obvious that he couldn’t draw from the dry, hot atmosphere around him. And almost as soon as he started, Pitch began to seed the snowstorm with flashes of golden light.

The shadows reacted immediately. But they couldn’t swoop through the glowing snow in order to reach Jack, so they shot down to Pitch, where the axe destroyed them. They swirled through the room and Jack pointed his staff at the snowstorm itself, sending flurries of snow to corral them and force them towards Pitch’s axe. Once, when he was human, he’d shepherded sheep. Jack decided that shepherding shadows to their doom was far more satisfying.

Jack hunted through the rest of the giant cavern, sending the snowstorm all the way up to the vaulted ceiling, until finally he realised that there was nothing left in the place but glittering pieces of snow that spread their white, glowing light onto every surface they fell upon.

Jack drifted down to Pitch’s side, as Pitch dusted snow off his robe.

‘You’re better at the snowstorms,’ Pitch said primly, and Jack smiled.

‘You’re better with the light.’

Their smiles faded. They weren’t done.

Pitch strode into the dark, away from the cavern. Even though he hadn’t been in the lair for some time, he had memorised the passages. Jack floated behind him, looking around, feeling ill. The cavern behind them felt neutralised – covered in snow like that – but the lair was large, and Pitch was sure that there were more shadows left.

Moving through the normal shadows behind Pitch was still frightening. The shadows were cloying, the caverns designed to be as creepy as possible. And every now and then waves of heat would gust towards them and Jack would feel unsettled and dizzy.

Jack realised they were close to Pitch’s personal cave, when they entered a space of complete darkness. Jack made a small sound, and Pitch reached back with a hand.

‘It can’t hurt you,’ Pitch said.

Jack nodded. He should know that by now. He teleported through shadows with Pitch all the time. He was familiar with the dark. But the darkness he knew still contained a little bit of light. And this complete darkness disturbed him. He pushed through it, over a threshold, into a very dimly lit space. Light came from two smoke holes in the ceiling, but it wasn't enough to do more than give the very faintest sense of a space carved into rock.

The dark didn't bother Pitch. He had exceptional night vision. He moved over to an oil lamp and lit it. Even that small light made a huge difference. Jack could see the outline of giant wardrobes. The burn-marked wooden table where he had once seen Pitch drinking tea.

Jack saw it. The outline of a metal, rectangular box.

Pitch summoned the golden light to his axe and the room shone. Jack looked around in awe, and then got out of the way, flying back a safe distance.

There was a huge crunch as Pitch buried his axe into the metal box, not even waiting to open it, nor checking the card to see what it said. The Nightmare Men hissed and stormed inside their metal, lead-lined prison, but the light was too strong for them and they burned away, Pitch pouring his concentration into the light.

Jack heard a small click behind him, and turned, confused.

A tiny metal box rested on a chest of drawers, and Jack stared.

'Pitch?' Jack said, but his voice was too small, he was too frightened. He felt paralysed, suddenly, with terror.

The single Nightmare Man that emerged didn't taunt, didn't waste any time.

The shadow shot forth and Jack screamed in agony and revulsion as his own staff burned his hand and something malevolent, soul-destroying, poured its way into his body. It oozed through his eyes, his mouth and throat. He could feel it in his lungs.

There was a struggle. An excruciating, blistering struggle. He didn't know how he was struggling with it but he was. Bile rose in his throat, choked him, and he was drowning again, drowning *again*. He heard nothing but high-pitched screaming, over and over, and then-

\*

A golden light that blasted through his very being. It was warm and inspired confidence and chased away the dark.

It was as though he'd found himself in the centre of a star.

There were two bars of warmth around him, holding his arms to his body, keeping him safe. Rays of light split through him, a kind of warmth that didn't even hurt his ice, didn't make him feel like he was melting. It was radiant and soft. It felt like the truth.

The light died down slowly and Jack reached for it, his arms and hands shaking violently. His throat began to feel sore. The arms holding him were too tight, and his ribs hurt. Someone was standing over him, crowding him.

Jack *remembered*.

He gasped hoarsely, and then couldn't stop gasping, hyperventilation taking over. Tears spilled and

Jack choked on the horror and dread that were left inside of him now that the light was gone. He felt polluted, dirty, disgusting. He felt the imprint of the shadow all the way through him, even though it was gone.

He jack-knifed into himself and threw up violently, clawing at his own chest, trying to get the feeling out of him.

Pitch knelt over him immediately, one hand attempting to draw Jack's hands away from his chest, the other pulling him close.

'It's done,' Pitch was saying, and he sounded frantic, as though he hadn't been breathing properly for some time. 'It's done. It's done, I promise you.'

Jack sobbed, hysterical. He dry-retched and pressed his face against the hot, stone floor and wailed at the *wrongness* of it.

Jack's body shuddered, over and over again.

'How, how, *how?*' Jack said, his voice breaking. 'How can you handle so many? Just one- That was *just one*, and I-'

Jack felt pathetic, he felt *weak*. He felt like everything August had said about him was right.

Pitch's arms tightened and Jack saw his staff in the corner of his eye and reached for it. He grabbed it and then winced. The underside of his hand felt burnt.

'My pure-hearted one,' Pitch said, his voice soothing. 'They're gone now. They're gone.'

Pitch held Jack until his breathing calmed. Until he was left with the hiccups and shaking exhales that remained after a bout of panicked, frightened crying. Jack rubbed at his eyes with his fingers and felt ashamed. It obviously hadn't even lasted that long. One moment he was there, and the next...

'I did something that shouldn't be possible,' Pitch whispered, and Jack looked up at him through blurred vision.

'What?'

'I made the light. All of me. Not my axe, not just my hands. *All* of me. It's supposed to be a legend. I didn't know I could do that. I turned and saw that you'd been taken, and then I just...'

'You've...done it before,' Jack said. 'You don't remember?'

Pitch's eyes widened and he shook his head. Jack smiled weakly, looking around the cavern. It didn't seem possible that the shadows could be gone after *that*, but he couldn't sense them anymore, and Pitch didn't seem worried. He trusted Pitch's instincts. Jack sagged weakly against Pitch, taking deep breaths, focusing on calming himself.

'You did it at the gymnasium before the shadows got you. For a moment, I almost thought it'd work.'

Pitch blew out a surprised breath, and then smoothed his hand down Jack's spine in a single, centring motion.

'It was a legend. A...a fairytale. I shouldn't have been able to do it. I was an arrogant, narcissistic

warrior. And I improved as a General, *somewhat*, but-'

Pitch laughed, a self-deprecating noise.

'I'm really glad you could do it.'

'I'm glad I could too. How do you feel?'

Jack made a thick noise of denial in his throat. He didn't want to think about it ever again. However long that shadow had him for – seconds, minutes – it was long enough. How Pitch managed to recover after so long being possessed, he just didn't understand.

'Uh,' Jack said, clearing his throat. 'Dirty. Like...I don't know. It's awful. Tell me that feeling isn't in you all the time now, even though they're gone.'

Pitch sighed. He stroked the backs of his fingers across Jack's cheek.

'It was something that was 'in me' from the very first moment I entered into my initiation with the dark. Jack, it's- I was *born* to be able to withstand it. You, however, were not.'

Jack nodded fervently.

'I don't like it here,' Jack said.

Pitch rubbed a single, slow circle over his back, tucking his hand underneath Jack's hood and lightly scratching between his shoulder blades.

'Thankfully, I don't believe we'll *ever* have to come back.'

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'He Sees Me,' Jack – free from the shadows at last – decides to visit Jamie's home. He also visits a friend he made during the attack at the school, and then decides to have a long, necessary conversation with the Man in the Moon. Also, shibari.

# He Sees Me

## Chapter Notes

Wow, we are really winding down now. It's so hard to believe! A lot of things get tied up in this chapter, which was kind of amazing to write. Also, 'apologies' (sorry not sorry) for the 4500 words of porn.

A tremendous thank you, as well, for all those who are still commenting. Means a lot!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After Jack's brief experience with shadow possession, the nightmares worsened and Jack's progress with Pitch and the Guardians slid backwards rapidly. Everyone seemed to understand, Pitch especially, and after a few days of feeling guilty at flinching at things and not liking total darkness in any room, he started to feel a bit more stable again. The dirty feeling that the shadow had left inside of him dissipated, but it didn't entirely go away.

He looked at Pitch with a new sense of wonder and awe. He'd always respected what Pitch had gone through, not being able to imagine it. And now he could imagine it even *less*. How did someone live with shadow possession for that long, and have anything left of their personality? It was – Jack thought – a miracle. Pitch seemed to shrug it off as biology, but Jack wasn't so sure.

He felt like he and Pitch were on the precipice of a 'serious conversation' about their future, and he didn't want to have it. There was still a part of him that was terrified that Pitch thought that things were temporary. There was a part of him that thought that maybe *he* thought things were temporary. Jack liked to be nomadic. Liked to travel from place to place. What would Pitch expect from him? Jack wanted to sleep in tree boughs again and was starting to feel the wanderlust that used to course inside of him every day.

He wasn't exactly a domestic spirit. He needed freedom and travel and open spaces.

The next week saw an improvement. He left the Workshop more, stayed out with Mora from dawn until after dusk. Pitch seemed happy about it, and so Jack rediscovered the things that he enjoyed about winter and the open world again. The more time passed, the more it seemed like it was really true.

The shadows were gone.

Augus was defeated.

The skies were empty and his to enjoy. He and Mora raced side by side, and he rode her more often, getting used to trusting in her ability to read the winds for him so he could concentrate on other things, like creating spectacular species of ice storms.

It was the children that helped him the most.

Jack started making snow days again. They were tentative at first, and he was rusty. They also didn't come as easily as they used to now that his centre was no longer fun. He had to consciously get in touch with that side of himself, choose to immerse himself in it.



It was an overcast day when he touched down at the house where Jamie Bennett had lived. Jack landed lightly in the back garden, wondering if they were even still living there. It was a big house for a single father and two daughters.

Mora wasn't with him. She'd been sleeping in Sandy's cloud when he'd left, and he didn't have the heart to wake her.

And there, where Jack had made an ice tree to replace the one that had died, there was a new tree growing sturdily. Its roots had planted deep in the ground, and its branches reached up to the sky. Even though it had almost finished shedding its leaves for the winter, it thrummed with life. Jack placed a gentle hand on one of the small branches, making sure he didn't frost it accidentally.

He sat down cross-legged by the plaque that Wesley had placed in front of the tree. He traced Jamie's name and looked up at the house. He hadn't meant to end up at Jamie's house. His mind traced delicately over memories he'd tried to forget. The feeling of Jamie dying, how that had wrenched something out of his soul. How his children had responded. Wesley asking him to go to the doctor, to stay home...

Jack knew it wouldn't have helped anyway. Aneurysms were sometimes too sudden for anything to be done.

But why Jamie? Of all people?

Jack sighed and quietly frosted the plaque, pensive.

Jack looked up quickly when the back door opened. Alice, the eldest daughter, came running outside with a book on dinosaurs in one hand and some plastic dinosaur toys in the other. She halted as soon as she saw Jack, eyes widening. Jack felt a shock of recognition at being seen. He didn't think he would ever get used to it.

A moment later Emily ran out and almost slammed straight into her sister. She held My Little Ponies in her hand, her yellow hair in a ponytail.

She saw him too, then pointed and gasped. Her mouth opened comically wide.

Jack smiled.

'Hey guys,' he said. 'Hope you don't mind that I decided to drop in!'

'It's *Jack Frost!*' Emily whispered to her sister, and Alice was staring at Jack in wonder, but she stopped long enough to dramatically roll her eyes.

'Oh my god, Em, I *know*.'

Emily made a high-pitched noise and then ducked past her sister and skidded down to her knees on the grass in front of him, staring up into his eyes. And then she looked down where Jack's hand was resting on the plaque, and her eyes opened even wider.

'Oh, you miss our Daddy,' Emily said. 'Do you miss our Daddy?'

Jack swallowed, maintained the smile gamely even as Alice approached. Alice had a knowing look in her eye, mature for a nine year old. But then, Jack had always known that about kids; they were far more mature than adults gave them credit.

'I do,' Jack said, though he said it to Alice. 'I just thought I'd come by. Your Daddy was my first

real believer, you know. The very first.'

'He talked about you a lot,' Alice said, sitting down. She looked at the plaque soberly, and then set down her book on dinosaurs, resting the toy dinosaurs on top. 'He told us he was the first one who saw you. And that it's important to believe in things. I want to be a palaeontologist when I grow up, but I'm still going to believe in you even when I'm a scientist.'

Alice smiled shyly. She tucked a strand of long, brown hair behind her ear and then reached out and tugged on Emily's ponytail. Emily was just staring at Jack. She took in his hair, his hands, his staff, his clothing, even his feet. She stared at his toes for a very long time.

'Are they weird or something?' Jack said, wriggling them, and Emily giggled.

'Toes are always weird!'

Jack laughed and waved his staff absently, creating a sparkling wave of diamond dust in the air around them. The sun was just at the right angle that it would create the rainbows and light effects that he wanted. Emily gave a long, drawn out, '*Oh*,' and Alice stared with an appreciative smile on her face.

'That is *cool*,' Alice said, and Jack smiled.

'Yeah, I think so.'

'Daddy used to love it when it snowed,' Alice said.

'Did he?' Jack said, grinning. He never caught up with Jamie as often as he probably should have. Time slipped by differently for him. It was nice to imagine Jamie as an adult, enjoying the snow. He hoped it didn't mean that Jamie missed him too much. But he hoped maybe not, with his daughters and his husband.

'Yeah!' Emily said. 'Will you make it snow?'

'I...sure!'

Jack sprang up into the air and summoned a light snowfall easily.

'Do you guys want to rug up first?' he said, and they shook their heads as they jumped up. Tiny pieces of snow whirled and flurried around the children. Emily made her ponies dance through them, and Alice held out her hands and let the snow fall on her fingers, watching it melt and smiling.

'He really, really liked snow,' Alice said, and when she looked at Jack, there were tears in her eyes. Jack felt his heart twist. They were too young to have lost their father already. He wished he could have done more.

'I miss him so much,' Alice said, and then rubbed stray tears from her face. 'But Dad says that Daddy watches over us still, and I don't know if I believe that, but I *want* to.'

'Well, I think that's important,' Jack said. 'That you want to believe in it. I'd like to believe that too.'

'I believe it,' Emily whispered. 'I believe it lots.'

Jack smiled. Emily nodded back seriously.

The back door flew open again, and Wesley – wearing a business shirt and looking tired – came out staring at the weather in dismay.

‘They didn’t predict snow today!’ Wesley said, and then looked down just as Emily started jumping in excitement, her little hands clenching into fists.

‘Look, Dad! Look!’

Suddenly two hands were pointing at him and Jack flushed. He didn’t expect to be seen. Jamie could see him as an adult, but overall, the fact that most children still couldn’t meant that adults didn’t stand a chance. It was something most of them grew out of, and Jack couldn’t really blame-

‘Is that...is that...Jack Frost?’ Wesley said, squinting at Jack and then rubbing vigorously at his eyes. His mouth dropped open a lot like Emily’s had at the beginning. He took several dazed steps forward and then stopped again.

Alice ran to him and took him by the hand, pulling him over.

Jack stared. He couldn’t do anything else.

*But...he’s an adult. I don’t...*

‘Wait, I...wait. You’re real?’ Wesley said, and Jack shrugged, a smile crept over his face.

*But how can he see me? Is that Jamie’s influence? Are there other adults who can see me now too? Oh my god, he sees me!*

‘Really real,’ Jack said, and Emily giggled.

Wesley looked at the plaque that still had frost spirals on it, looked at the tree, then he looked back at Jack and shook his head in wonder.

‘I just- Wow,’ Wesley trailed off and then rubbed his eyes again.

‘He’s real, Dad,’ Alice said, squeezing his hand. ‘Remember what Daddy used to say?’

‘Yeah, love, I know. I just...’

Wesley breathed out quiet laughter, and then shook his head in disbelief again. He looked at the plaque and smiled with a fondness that stole its way into Jack’s heart. Wesley had loved Jamie. That much was obvious. He wondered how he was getting on. It would be hard raising two daughters, working full-time. Jack knew a lot of parents had to go through it, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t difficult.

‘I just wanted to say *thank you*,’ Wesley said. ‘You came and made that ice tree, didn’t you? That was around a bad time for me, and the tree we planted had died and I felt like- And then I came home and the ice tree was there and it lasted for *days*. It was- Jamie never stopped talking about you. And the other Guardians. But I still didn’t really – I mean, I thought it was for kids.’

Jack smiled at Wesley’s earnestness, smiled to remember the ice tree that he’d made.

‘Well, you must have a pretty big heart, because most of the time even adults who want to believe in us...they just can’t.’

‘I had to have a big heart,’ Wesley said, and his voice cracked. ‘You know, Jamie wouldn’t have wanted anything less.’

Jack squeezed his eyes shut. He was surprised then, to feel two small arms wrapping around his legs, and a head pushed into his side. He looked down through his tears and Emily looked up at him, smiling. Jack looked up at Wesley, and they both shared a smile.

‘You know you’re always welcome,’ Wesley said. ‘I don’t really understand how it works for you guys, or anything like that, but you’re *always* welcome. And if we’re ever not here, you could always leave one of those ice things for us. Like the tree. We’d like that.’

‘We really would,’ Alice said, and Jack couldn’t speak around the lump in his throat.

He hadn’t realised how *guilty* he felt about Jamie dying until now, until it finally started to trickle away. He hadn’t realised how bad he felt that he’d never been able to do anything, that he hadn’t come *sooner*. But now, here, with Jamie’s family accepting him as Jamie always had, it was hard to hold onto it.

‘I would really, really like that, hey,’ Jack said. ‘Might mean it’s a bit colder around here though.’

‘Uh huh,’ Wesley said, and grinned. ‘We’ve never minded the cold. You might say that we prefer winter.’

Jack laughed, and Wesley joined in. He looked at Jack with a blend of awe and understanding.

He left them a little bit later, feeling strangely shy, unused to adults seeing him and finding it harder to be himself.

He felt strangely proud as he sailed on through the skies. Jamie was his first believer, and his best. The fire in his heart that Jamie provided might have been gone, but Jack was glad to know Jamie had shared that fire with others too. Once, Jamie had saved the world. Long after that, he’d just kept on sharing the goodness of himself with other people.

Jack was glad that he’d gotten to meet him, to spend time with him, and his heart was surprisingly light as he flew onwards.

He would definitely go back one day.

\*

His next port of call was harder to locate. He made his way first to the school in Scotland, amazed at how normal it looked after the battle with the fae. There were several deep cracks in the bitumen, but otherwise, everything looked whole.

He asked the wind – who touched everyone he met – to take him to Patty.

Jack ended up at a top apartment, looking through the window of a neat, unremarkable block of flats. He peered into what must have been Patty’s bedroom. A light was on in the room and the hall beyond, the day was dimming outside to a lilac twilight. The windowsill flaked paint beneath Jack’s fingers, damp clung to it, and it automatically frosted beneath his grip.

He ducked out of sight when he saw Patty being shepherded into her room by what must have been her mother.

He’d always wanted to visit Patty again. She’d been so strong. She was the one who had told him that the girl the Nain Rouge had killed was named Stacey, and that they’d been friends, and she

was the first one to let the power of Jack's snow help her. And then she'd been strong enough to help the other kids that were too scared to run to safety. He couldn't forget her. She had the kind of strength of spirit that Jamie had.

Jack poked his head up again about thirty minutes later, only to get a fright when he saw Patty's face pressed against the window, eyes wide.

They both reeled back at the same time. Jack dropped a few feet in the air, and she stumbled backwards. But she was back at the window immediately, and she slid it up, staring at him in excitement. It was a far cry from the bedraggled, pigtailed, terrified child he'd seen at the besieged school. She beckoned him closer, brown eyes gleaming bright.

'Come on!' she said, smiling. 'Doofus! I was late at school because of band and Mum picked me up. We just got home! I saw you just hanging up there. I realised who you were when I saw your stick. It's different now, all silver! Can I hold it?'

Jack ducked in through the window and landed lightly on her floor, and then carefully handed her the staff. She took it in both hands, holding it reverently, turning it in her palms.

'Why's it silver?' she said. She jumped onto her bed, which was covered in a Pokemon bedspread. She patted it, indicating that he should sit next to her. He liked how bold she was, figured that it was probably that same boldness that allowed her to trust in the snowballs and help her schoolmates.

'Well, the silver helped to get rid of those shadows, like the ones at the school? But the shadows are gone now, and so I guess now it's just silver!'

Patty handed the staff back to him, but it was obvious that she wanted to hold it for a little longer, so he gave it back to her. He wasn't quite as needful of it as he used to be. He hopped up and perused her room, looking at video game consoles, books in a low bookshelf along with stuffed Pokemon toys.

That was when he noticed the drawings on the wall and saw several pictures of that time at the school. His eyes widened in shock. There was a drawing of Stacey; alive, but sad. Her name was written underneath it in a teacher's scrawl, with the date beneath. Beside that a drawing of North and Jack Frost together, lightning and darkness in the background. And then another drawing in a frame of North and Jack and Patty holding hands, and Patty had drawn a smile on her own face.

'I did them,' Patty said, sliding off the bed and walking towards him. She pressed his staff back into his hand and then pointed at the last picture, at her own smiling face. 'Mummy really liked that one. And she got it a special frame. But I like the others too.'

'Does it...make you sad?' Jack said, looking at the black oil pastel thunderclouds behind North and Jack in the second illustration.

'I'm sad,' Patty said, and she grimaced at him. 'But I'm okay. My parents hug me after nightmares. My friend Willow braids my hair when I'm sad at school.'

Jack smiled at her.

'You're really brave, Patty.'

She grinned at him, and then looked up at her own picture.

'I know I am. Mummy said so, and I helped save some kids. Like in a *movie*. I'm gonna be a fire

fighter when I grow up. My Uncle says I'll just end up saving a lot of cats, but I *like* cats.'

Patty's eyebrows shot up, her eyes widened, and the next moment she skidded down to the chest of drawers beside her table and pulled out the bottom one. She carefully drew out a sheaf of artwork, and Jack was – for the briefest instant – reminded of holding the Nightmare King's 'art' in his own hands. He pushed the memory aside, waited.

She went through them carefully, then drew out a smaller piece of paper. She handed it to him.

'You can have this, for when you're sad.'

Jack blinked at her, looked down at the piece of paper. It was another piece in oil pastels, boldly coloured. And on it, Patty had drawn herself and Jack holding hands. And Jack had his staff in one hand and a pile of snowballs beside him. And next to him, Patty was holding a snowball, and grinning out of the page. He touched his fingers to it delicately, then looked at her.

'Are you sure?'

'Doofus!' Patty said, giggling at his reaction to the picture, which Jack took to mean *Yes*.

'This is really cool, Patty. You could always be an artist if the fire fighting thing didn't work out.'

'Doofus, I can do *both*,' Patty said, and Jack's face split into a smile.

'You're the best, you know that?'

She nodded, and then touched the artwork.

'Will you put it up in your house? Do you have a house? Is it made of snow?'

'I will, and I'm making one and I don't know yet.' Jack held up his fingers as he answered each of her questions, and then beamed. 'You know, this is really cool. No one's ever given me something like this before. Of course I'll put it up in my house!'

Patty's confidence slipped for a few seconds, and wonder crept back over her face. It was as though she was realising, for the very first time, that she really did have Jack Frost in her room. Her mouth dropped open, and then she looked at the artwork in his hand, and looked at his staff.

'Mummy would tell me off for being too *precocious*, right now,' Patty said, looking vaguely horrified with herself.

'I like precocious,' Jack said, winking at her.

Patty smiled in relief. And Jack had his own relief to contend with. Relief that she seemed like she was genuinely doing well. He hoped her classmates were. He hoped that the damage August had brought into the human world was healing.

'I'm going to go now. Snow days to make and things to freeze, you know how it is. Are you sure I can have this?'

'Is it really going up on your wall?' she said, her voice faintly breathless.

'As soon as I have a wall to put it on,' Jack affirmed, and Patty jogged on the spot in excitement. At that, her mother hollered something at her from another room, and Patty froze, a grin locked on her face. Jack took that as his cue to slip out through the window, carefully folding the piece of paper to his chest to stop the wind from catching at it.

‘You’re gonna be a great fire fighter,’ Jack said, and Patty ran to the window and waved at him.

‘You put it on your wall!’ Patty said, and Jack laughed as the wind caught him up and thrust him up into the sky.

He turned onto his back, rolled up the artwork and tucked it into his hoodie and made sure it was properly secure. He left a benign snowstorm behind him, a reminder to Patty that he’d been there.

Later, the moon rose in the sky. Stars twinkled from a distance. The night was crisp and cold, Jack letting snow and frost trail out behind him.

Jack flew on his back, staring up at the moon. Sadness crept over him and he realised that he couldn’t hold his grudge against the Man in the Moon forever.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said, wondering if there was anyone there to hear him now. Wondering if the orphaned Tsar Lunanoff was alive or able to listen. Wondering if the Tsar Lunanoff had been able to hang on long enough to see the monster that had destroyed his parents and his life be defeated.

‘I am sorry. I don’t know why you said ‘It’s time,’ and then showed me Jamie’s face. And for a while I was really- I guess I was just mad. But I was mad before that too. And I suppose you know that, because you’ve heard me talking to you for a long time. I don’t know why we don’t hear from you anymore.

‘If it’s like Pitch says – you’re dying, or dead already – I’m just...sorry. I wish we could have done more for you somehow, and that we had known. Could you have told us? Was there anything we could have done? I never realised you weren’t supposed to live in the moon all your life. And so I’m going to choose to believe that you meant for me to just spend time with Jamie, because I hadn’t seen him in so long. I’m going to choose to believe that it was time for Pitch to get out of that lair and start living again.’

Jack closed his eyes and breathed deep, taking in the different scents on the winds around him. Wood-fires from hearths and fireplaces nearby. A forest of pines to the south. Something of cinnamon, elusive, that was North’s Workshop and the promise of Pitch waiting for him.

‘I still believe in you, Manny,’ Jack said, opening his eyes and looking at the moon again. ‘Okay? I stopped for a little while there. But I believe in you.’

He didn’t feel a response and he didn’t expect one. He knew that if the Man in the Moon couldn’t be there for them anymore, they’d handle it. North was a fantastic leader, no one questioned his ability to organise and coordinate a group.

He felt bittersweet after saying what he’d said. He felt the weight of it on his shoulders; the knowledge that they would just never know exactly what had happened, or if they could have done anything. But he liked the idea that the Man in the Moon saw something in Pitch, saw something as real and true as Jack had seen, and decided that – among other things – it was time for Kozmotis Pitchiner to step out of the dark and learn how to live again.

And if that was true, then the young Tsar Lunanoff was a brave, forgiving being.

Jack wished he could have met him.

\*

Jack ducked in through Pitch’s window and gave Mora a long, leaning hug when he returned. Pitch was fast asleep. He’d always needed more sleep than the Guardians, but since recovering from the

possession, he couldn't afford to skip a single night. Mora watched over him, an avid look on her face, ears pricked forwards. Pitch was having nightmares again.

He scratched Mora's neck affectionately and rubbed the gritty sand of her muzzle, and she bunted him with her head. He smiled, leaned his forehead against her cheek, stroked his hand down her side a few more times.

He pulled out Patty's picture and left it, paper still rolled carefully, on the chest of drawers. It hadn't been damaged during his flight, and he was glad. It was one of the nicest things he'd ever been given.

He curled up alongside Pitch. In the faint moonlight, the darkness around them – a dead, dormant darkness, Jack reminded himself – the light wasn't forgiving, and highlighted Pitch's angular features. But Jack thought he was striking and handsome. He always looked innocent in sleep, and it was strange to think that his face was the one who could be so menacing or thunderous during the day.

Jack kissed his cheekbone lightly, pressing fingertips to the underside of his jaw.

Pitch stirred, wrapped a sleep-heavy arm around Jack's body and pulled him close, murmuring something unintelligible. Jack shifted until he was a bit more comfortable. He lay on top of the blankets most of the time, and Pitch lay beneath, even though he didn't need them. Jack wanted to get used to blankets, but the combination of Pitch's body heat along with the fabric meant that he just overheated.

Jack stared at Pitch for a long time, and then felt a distant, responding warmth in his gut. It had been so long since he'd felt Pitch inside of him. He pressed his body alongside Pitch's, biting his bottom lip.

He wanted to be ready, but he wasn't sure if he was.

After a few minutes he sighed and reached out to the chest of drawers blindly, grabbing a snowflake made of golden sand and squeezing it until it warmed and activated.

Whatever Sandy was doing, whatever good dreams Jack was having, they were helping. He wondered if Sandy was deliberately making it so that Jack couldn't remember them, he'd not been game enough to ask. Whatever he was doing, the changes were slow and not overwhelming. Pitch had been right. Sandy knew how to help, and it didn't seem to bother him at all.

He still had nightmares. Sometimes before or after the good dreams. He always felt adrift afterwards, as though he'd been placed back into his body incorrectly.

Jack watched as the room glowed golden. The dreamsand reminded him so much of Pitch's light, and – knowing the two were connected – he smiled. He reached out for the dreamsand, touched it with his fingers, and was surprised to see a brief image of Patty dragging him along by the hand, hair in pigtails, clearly excited. He looked over at the roll of paper on the chest of drawers, and then closed his eyes.

Sleep waited for him. It was easy to find with the warmth of Pitch's arm around him.

\*

The next day, Pitch was up earlier than Jack, and Jack found him in the outdoor arena training with the axe, working through a series of drills.



Jack watched and felt awash with nervous, uncontained energy. He didn't remember any nightmares. But when he'd awoken, he'd reached out for Pitch and then rolled into the warmth he'd left imprinted into the mattress. He'd breathed deep and felt a welcome ache low in his gut.

He wanted more than just Pitch inside of him. He wanted to try something new. He didn't know if it would help, but...

Once, Pitch had told him to raise his hands above his head, to cross his wrists together, to keep them there. He'd done that, and then Pitch had carefully taken Jack apart and it had been one of the most intense experiences of his life. Restraining himself for Pitch; it had been amazing. Despite everything he'd experienced, it was something he remained curious about. He hadn't brought it up again, because he thought maybe there was something wrong with him for liking it.

People didn't want to be restrained, did they? It wasn't something that people often thought of as a good idea.

Jack tapped his feet on the floor, drummed his fingers on the bench. He watched Pitch, who occasionally looked up and stared at him, eyes narrowing, before continuing with his drills.

*Oh god, what do I say? Do I just say, 'Tie me up?' What if I back out or I flashback or it goes wrong? And then it'll be my fault because I suggested something stupid and then Pitch won't trust me anymore when I say I'm ready and he hardly trusts me at all anyway when I say I'm ready, because how often have I said that and-*

Pitch's axe thunked to the ground. Jack blinked in shock, and Pitch walked over to the side of the Workshop and leaned it against the wall. Then he disappeared into shadows.

'The hell? Come on, Pi-'

Jack jumped in fright when two arms wrapped around him from behind. He knew it was Pitch when he felt his nose and mouth press against the side of his neck. He shuddered.

'Easy,' Pitch whispered, and then licked the side of his neck. 'Gods, I've missed this.'

Jack was still trying to wrestle with his fear. He took deep breaths, eased along by Pitch reaching up and slowly stroking lines down the middle of his chest, over and over.

'You've missed this?' Jack said, his voice higher than usual, and Pitch chuckled under his breath.

'I know your fears quite well. I have an idea of what you've been thinking about. It's *very* distracting. I *know* what you want.'

Jack's eyes widened. He shivered when Pitch slid a broad hand under Jack's sweatshirt and splayed his palm flat against his belly, before stroking up and pressing his hand against Jack's heart.

'I'm afraid I'm *demanding*,' Pitch crooned. 'You'll have to tell me what you want.'

'Pitch, anyone could see us out here. This isn't like the time when-'

Pitch's fingers grazed his nipple, and Jack's head tilted back. Pitch scraped his teeth over his neck in reward.

'Tell me,' Pitch said again, his voice deepening.

Jack's mouth dropped open on an unvoiced sound as Pitch scratched lightly at the skin underneath

his collarbone, plucked at his nipple with an easy confidence. Jack kept his eyes open, staring around them. It was the training arena. *Anyone* could see them. Jack wasn't afraid of North like Pitch was, but he was pretty sure if North saw them like *this*...

'If you tell me, we can go to Kostroma,' Pitch whispered into his ear, before pushing his tongue in, creating a hot, wet space for himself. Jack moaned.

'Do you know,' Pitch said, making sure his breath touched Jack's sensitive ear, 'how much I've thought about what I could do to you? It isn't actually that I think about fucking *all* the time, but I do think about what I could do to you a great deal. What we could do together. Here you are, about as ready as I think you can be and you are practically humming with tension. Can you tell? I can. If you'll just *tell* me what you want me to do, I can help you, Jack.'

*Oh god.*

Pitch's hand started to trail towards his crotch, and Jack's eyes flew open.

*North is going to see. Someone is going to see. Oh god Toothiana and Sandy are probably looking down right now and-*

'You would be warm,' Pitch soothed. 'You would be warm and safe, and we could go *right now*. Nothing is stopping us, except just some tiny, weensy little words, Jack. Won't you tell me?'

Jack groaned and sagged back into Pitch's arms, and Pitch's hand stopped moving towards his cock, and simply tightened around him.

'Tie me up,' Jack whispered. 'I just...please? You've talked about it before. I think about it. I don't know why.'

'I do,' Pitch said, his words a dark promise. Jack tried to turn to face him, but Pitch held him tight. 'Tell me what else you want.'

'Oh god,' Jack whispered.

'Because I would very, *very* much like to be inside you. And-'

'Hey, remember when you were like all about going slow?' Jack said, breathless. His face heated up, and he was sure it was because of Pitch's chest pressed into him from behind, his tongue licking its way up his carotid artery. Hands and arms keeping him still. 'Remember that?'

'Remember when I was inside you?' Pitch said, and Jack groaned again. 'Do you, Jack? How full did you feel? I trust your fears to tell me when you're not ready, Jack, but do you know what they're telling me now?'

'That if one of the Guardians sees us, they're gonna-'

'They're telling me that you want this. Oh, you have some apprehensions here and there, but that has always been the case with you. So think a great deal about what you want, and tell me. Please, Jack.'

It was the begging that undid him. Hearing the shakiness enter Pitch's voice, turning it from its normal smooth confidence to a sincere desperation that plucked at Jack's insides. He turned his face towards Pitch's, feeling shy.

'Uh,' Jack said, and then swallowed. He felt Pitch smile against his ear and pressed his lips

together for a few seconds. 'I, will you...'

It was harder than it looked. He came up with several different ways to say what he was thinking, but each one sounded more impossible than the next. He cringed and then just decided to say it.

'Will you fuck me?' Jack said, and Pitch's arms tightened around Jack's middle. Jack wondered if he should have said something more romantic, but he couldn't make his mouth move around any of the other words. That was the only phrase that was left available to him.

The next moment, they flew through the darkness. They landed with Jack still trying to find his feet, even as Pitch landed easily and pushed him towards the bed, one hand at his back and the other wrapped around his ribs.

'That's a yes, then,' Jack said, and turned to him, wide eyed. Pitch stared down at him, hungrily, his golden irises less visible behind the expanding black of his pupils.

'Remember,' Pitch said, 'we can stop whenever you like. Do you understand?'

Jack's heart pounded hard. It resonated through his pulse points; he could feel it in his head, in his neck, at the base of his wrists, even behind his knees. Pitch advanced upon him and took his staff out of his hands, hooking it around the bedpost. He took the drawstrings of Jack's sweatshirt in his fingers and tugged on them lightly.

'Do you understand?'

'Yeah,' Jack said.

'Then perhaps you should get undressed.'

The words held a sliver of soft command in them, and Pitch tugged on the drawstrings once more for good measure, before walking off to the bedside chest of drawers to pull out a vial of lubricant. Jack stared at it as Pitch tossed it onto the bedspread, and then watched, wide-eyed, as Pitch walked around the bed towards a different, larger chest of drawers. As Jack watched, Pitch raised his brow as if to say; *Well?*

Jack pulled off his sweatshirt and let it fall to the ground. His hands paused on the fastening of his pants for a few seconds, and then he bit his lower lip and unfastened them. He tugged them off and then pulled up a corner of the blanket and covered himself, watching as Pitch turned around with several lengths of soft, pliant rope in his hands. Pitch looked each of them over, and then scrutinised Jack.

He looked back at the ropes and then discarded all of them except for one. He brought it over, took one of Jack's wrists and brought it upright, holding the rope against it. Jack didn't know what he was doing, but a moment later Pitch nodded in satisfaction and let Jack's wrist go.

He walked back over to the chest of drawers and took out a wickedly sharp looking pair of scissors, and Jack's eyes widened in alarm.

'It's for the rope, in case we need to get you out quickly,' Pitch said, voice soft. He placed the scissors up underneath the pillows and offered Jack a small smile. 'I like a more elaborate method of restraint than perhaps the average person. I appreciate the artform. Will you kneel in the middle of the bed for me? Any direction is fine.'

Jack would have to surrender the protection of the blanket, but if Pitch said he could face any direction, he could at least face away from Pitch. He felt a tingling in his body, a shallowness in his

breath, as he shifted towards the centre of the bed and knelt, facing the headboard, the pillows, the scissors that were hidden beneath them.

Pitch placed the length of rope beside Jack meaningfully, and then stepped away. Jack listened to the sound of Pitch methodically removing his robe, his undershirt, his thin black pants and boots. Pitch picked up all the clothing and folded it, before crawling back onto the bed behind Jack, kneeling behind him.

Jack took a deep, shaking breath, and then sighed it out when Pitch placed both of his hands on Jack's shoulders. Pitch could see the worst of his scars like this. But when Pitch reverently placed his palm flat against the scar his sword had left, Jack felt grounded. He closed his eyes, realised he was trembling.

'One day, you won't be afraid of this,' Pitch said and Jack stared ahead, wondering if that could ever possibly be true. 'Would you believe that I am actually looking forward to it?'

Pitch lay a gentle, tender kiss against the curve of his shoulder.

He drew both of his hands down Jack's upper arms, curling his fingers around Jack's skin, creating sparks of warmth. He reached forwards until he had circled his thumb and index fingers around Jack's wrists, and then shifted Jack's arms backwards.

Pitch folded Jack's arms carefully behind his back, one over the other, so that his palms faced outwards.

'Is that comfortable?' Pitch said and Jack nodded. 'You'll be able to brace yourself against the rope and relax into the restraints. I'll not be tying you tightly, since I don't think it's necessary. If anything feels too tight, tell me.'

'Okay,' Jack said, blinking ahead. Pitch kissed the curve of his shoulder again, and then picked up the rope.

Jack had expected that Pitch would simply bind him about the wrists and that would be that. He did not expect the elaborate process that came next. Pitch carefully looped the length of rope around his upper arms, his wrists, even across his chest, braced across the centre of his sternum, caging him. The process took time, and was filled not with many knots, but many loops of rope. Each loop made Jack more and more aware that if he panicked, if he needed to get out quickly, Pitch *would* need the scissors.

But, oddly, his fear didn't rise too much. The rope was textured, but waxed. He thought it would feel scratchy, but it was gentle against his skin. It contained him. When Pitch finished off by creating a knot at the top of Jack's back, Jack shivered and bit his bottom lip. He wasn't aroused, too fascinated with the process of what was happening, but he felt...

'I don't understand why,' Jack said, and Pitch lifted Jack's hair from the base of his neck and kissed the thin, horizontal scar there. Jack swallowed. He shifted his arms. The ropes weren't too tight at all. But he couldn't get his arms free, and if he relaxed his upper body, everything stayed in position. Pitch was right, he could brace or relax against the ropes. It wasn't like the time Pitch had taken him against the wall, told him to hold his hands above his head. That had required concentration and muscle control. This was different.

Pitch rubbed his hands up and down Jack's arms slowly, kissing his way along the sword scar. He found its edges so that he could lick along whole and healed skin at the same time, and Jack made a small noise in his throat, feeling a blush of sensation move through his body.

'I understand why,' Pitch said. After that, he kissed Jack's back around his restrained arms, licking warm lines against his flesh. Jack's eyes drifted shut, he tried to wet his lips with a dry tongue, mouth parched. When Pitch slid arms around him and simply held him for a little while, Jack sighed and leaned his head back against Pitch's shoulder.

Pitch slid his hands around Jack's ribs, coasting over rope and skin. He moved his way down Jack's torso, and Jack tensed, wondering if Pitch would tease, or if he would-

Jack inhaled sharply when Pitch stroked fingers up the length of him, making his cock twitch. Hot, calloused fingertips caressed the underside of his cock, before wrapping around him and squeezing with a familiarity that made Jack more comfortable.

'Can it be like the first time?' Jack said, and Pitch stilled and then rested his cheek alongside Jack's.

'You on top? That was going to be my suggestion.'

Jack shivered at the thought of it.

'Will I need my arms?' Jack said, and Pitch shook his head.

'Not at all. I'll support you.'

*Okay, Jack thought. I can do this.*

Pitch turned Jack carefully, since Jack couldn't use his arms to assist himself. And he found Jack's lips as Jack straddled him. Pitch lay gentle kisses against his mouth, before biting down and slipping his tongue inside. Jack gasped, would always gasp, because that sudden blaze of heat was always so startling. He licked up against Pitch's tongue with his own, his jaw going lax when Pitch encouraged his mouth to open wider. Jack's breath hitched, he groaned.

Pitch broke away and Jack followed his lips hungrily, unthinking. He was now straddling Pitch and they were face to face like last time, and Jack felt a shiver of nervousness move through him. He shifted his arms and felt the restraints, and then made a small sound in the back of his throat.

'It's okay,' Pitch whispered, kissing him immediately. He placed a long, lingering kiss on his cheek. 'Give it a few seconds. Nothing's going to hurt you. Do you trust me?'

Jack swallowed, closed his eyes, leaned his face against Pitch's. His hands and wrists twisted in the rope. It didn't hurt him, but he could feel that it wouldn't be forgiving if he really struggled. He took several deep breaths and Pitch reached up and caressed his arms with his palms again.

'Do you trust me?' Pitch said, and Jack nodded absently, and then nodded again, realising that he did. 'You look wonderful.'

Jack flushed. Pitch kissed his cheekbone, licked a hot, wet stripe over Jack's closed lips.

'My brave, brave, Jack,' Pitch said, and Jack swallowed. 'When I think about all that you've done.'

Fingertips found the scar that the sword had left behind. Pitch trailed his hand over it, and then moved over Jack's bound wrists so that he could continue bisecting Jack's spine with his fingers. He then curved his palm over Jack's ass and pulled Jack forwards, making sure that he kept his balance with the other hand holding onto his arm. Pitch was hard against him, and Jack's mouth opened on a rough exhale.

‘Please,’ Jack whispered.

Pitch supported him with one hand on his lower back, while he reached for the lubricant. Jack watched as Pitch opened the vial, and then pressed his mouth against Pitch’s collarbone, imprisoning bone between his teeth before kissing his way to another spot and doing it again. He withdrew and blew frost crystals over the cool saliva he left behind, and Pitch hissed, the hand supporting his lower back twitched. Jack smiled, kept kissing Pitch’s skin, tasting the mild saltiness of it, the faintest astringency.

Even not having his arms free, it was incredible to know he could affect Pitch like this.

Jack shuddered when he felt slick fingers grip his cock, catching and squeezing the head of him before moving down again. He moaned, arching into Pitch’s touch, and Pitch responded, moving his hand in time to Jack’s motions, letting Jack’s hips determine the pace. It wasn’t long before Jack whimpered against him, rolling his forehead against Pitch’s shoulder. It was getting harder to focus on anything except heat, Pitch’s hand against him, the way a cold thrill of sensation shot up through his spine whenever Pitch paid attention to the head of his cock, the neutral, supportive loops of rope around his arms and upper body, keeping him dependent on Pitch’s strength.

Pitch slid his hand away from Jack’s cock, murmuring a soothing sound when Jack moaned in protest. Jack’s eyes opened when he felt slick fingers move across his hips and then slide over the curve of his ass, seeking his entrance. He leaned forwards, encouraged by Pitch’s hand, and realised that Pitch wanted him to push his hips back. Jack licked at his lips again, mouth still warm from Pitch’s tongue, disoriented. It had been too long, he’d forgotten how masterful Pitch could be. Even when Jack was uncertain, Pitch knew what he was doing.

Pitch stroked fingers over his entrance, then slid the tip of his index finger inside. Jack opened his mouth against Pitch’s shoulder, biting down absently. It didn’t hurt, but there was a promise of more, of feeling full, and Jack felt helpless before the potential of it.

Pitch pushed deeper and Jack felt tendrils of warmth move through him from the point where he was breached. He was taking slow, shallow breaths against Pitch’s skin, sometimes forgetting to complete an inhale, exhaling too quickly. When Pitch started moving his finger, Jack muffled a noise against Pitch’s skin and his arms shifted restlessly. He wanted something to hold onto. The closest he could get in his restraints was pressing his forehead insistently against Pitch’s shoulder.

‘I want to put my arms around you,’ Jack said, having to pause every time Pitch pushed back into him. It seemed impossible now that Pitch would ever be able to fit his cock inside, but Jack knew that it wouldn’t be impossible. It would just take time.

‘You want the rope off?’ Pitch asked, and Jack shifted again in the safety of the rope. He liked it. He didn’t know what he wanted more. The rope off him, or the ability to press his fingernails into Pitch’s back.

Jack didn’t say anything, and Pitch’s finger slowed down, paused inside of him.

‘You want both,’ Pitch said, understanding. ‘May I suggest a compromise? The rope while I open you for me, and then I will untie you before I enter you.’

Jack nodded against Pitch’s skin, and Pitch’s finger curled within Jack, an approval that awoke sparks. Jack whimpered. His voice was stolen as Pitch withdrew and pressed back with two fingers, using the hand on the small of Jack’s back to keep him from arching upright, to keep his hips in place for him. Jack felt exposed. Felt vulnerable.

That, along with the sensations that Pitch was evoking, the stretch of what he was doing, made Jack feel attuned to Pitch. The heat of him, the warmth inspired in his own body, the fact that Pitch was restraining himself and Jack could tell. He could feel it in the tension of his arms, in the way that Pitch would restlessly duck his head down, as though he wanted his face to be alongside Jack's.

Jack tilted his head up, and Pitch pushed his fingers in deep as he claimed his lips. They both groaned at the same time, and then Pitch started thrusting his fingers in and out in earnest, demanding a response, detonating something in his gut that had him leaking precome on Pitch's skin. When Pitch started splaying his fingers out, causing a slight sting, Jack sunk his teeth into Pitch's skin and sucked hard, frost particles misting out from his mouth on every exhale. Pitch moaned, then chuckled darkly.

Jack swallowed, pushed down on Pitch's fingers, wanted more. He didn't want to come before Pitch was inside of him, and he thought there was a chance he might.

'I- *Please*,' Jack said.

Pitch withdrew and pushed back with three fingers, and Jack's breath caught high in his throat.

Pitch removed the hand from the small of Jack's back, and Jack had the sudden, overwhelming sensation that his centre of gravity was balanced by the fingers inside of him. He cried out as Pitch's fingers slipped and shifted. Pitch undid the knot at the top of Jack's back quickly, loosening the rope, causing Jack to shift on Pitch's fingers.

As soon as Jack could wriggle one of his arms free, he looped it around Pitch's neck, surging upwards and biting gently at Pitch's lower lip.

'I'm not going to last,' Jack said against his lips, his voice cracking on the words, and then he cried out sharply when Pitch roughly pushed his fingers up inside of him. 'You could at least play *fair*.'

'No,' Pitch whispered against his mouth. 'I don't play fair. And you *will* last.'

Pitch reached for the lubricant with one hand, even as he kept his fingers inside of Jack. He was quite good at manoeuvring the vial with one hand, and slicked his length efficiently, sliding his tongue into Jack's mouth at the same time.

He removed his fingers, Jack shifting hungrily. And when Pitch circled his hand tightly at the base of Jack's cock, squeezing to remind him that he could stave off Jack's release if he had to, Jack moaned long into Pitch's mouth.

Pitch broke away, gasping against Jack's cheek.

'Raise up, cant your hips towards me,' he said.

'I remember,' Jack replied, feeling his heart thundering inside of his body, wrapping both arms tightly around Pitch's shoulders, pressing his palms flat against the top of his back. Apprehension spiralled through him, old and familiar. It always seemed like a miracle that he got to have this at all, let alone more than once with the same person.

'I love you,' Pitch whispered, and Jack swallowed down the small, broken sound that caught in his throat. 'You don't have to be afraid of this either.'

Pitch positioned himself and Jack rose up, pressed down slowly until Pitch was at his entrance, until he began to slide in and Jack felt the stretch of it. He turned his mouth towards Pitch's, kissing

him to give himself something else to concentrate on. His hands dug hard into Pitch's shoulders. And Pitch's other hand was digging bruises into his hip, making sure that Jack didn't go too fast, but encouraging him down further when Jack paused.

Jack's breath was torn out of him as Pitch slid in. He'd forgotten how overwhelming it was. His legs shook as he lowered himself, and Pitch already had a tight grip on the base of his cock. Jack was too caught up in a variety of sensations to even know how close he was to coming, but he suspected it was close.

Jack lifted himself slowly and then lowered himself again, making room for Pitch inside of him. He was warming up faster than he had in a long time. It didn't matter if his body temperature was colder now, Pitch didn't cool down inside of him, remained an implacable line of heat that lit a fire up his spine and made his mouth dry.

He stopped when it became too much. It was the same point as last time; Pitch not fully inside of him, and holding him still with the hand at his hip, supporting Jack's knowledge of when he couldn't take more. Jack opened his mouth and dragged in breath after breath.

Here, in Kostroma, on Pitch's bed, it felt like *home*.

Jack blinked sudden tears out of his eyes, took a moment to gather himself together. After everything they'd been through, after nearly losing Pitch countless times, actually *losing* him for so long he didn't know if he would get him back despite his resolve to do so; after nearly dying, after flashbacks and constant terror and nightmares, it seemed impossible that they could have this. That Pitch could be inside of him, an implacable heat that caused arousal and pleasure to tie themselves into knots underneath his skin, that Jack could be trembling against him, fingers clawing marks into Pitch's back.

Pitch raised Jack up slowly, using the hand on his hip to guide the movement, and when Jack slid down again, Pitch thrust upwards, tearing a cry out of him.

'M'close,' Jack whimpered.

'Me too,' Pitch said roughly. 'We can do slow later. We *can*. We have all the time in the world, Jack.'

Pitch sounded like he hardly believed it himself. He was moving Jack up and down with concentration, never straying past the point that Jack had chosen as being too much, too full, and Jack felt himself opening to Pitch properly, his body temperature rising in increments.

'We can, can't we?' Jack gasped, and Pitch nodded.

'I want you to move in,' Pitch said, and Jack hiccupped a dazed, helpless laugh.

'We're having 'the talk' *now*?'

'Of course I'll understand if you can't. You're nomadic, we both know that.'

They both paused as Pitch slid in roughly. Jack shivered and resisted when Pitch went to draw him back up again. Instead, he pushed down meaningfully, and Pitch's fingers flexed on his skin.

Jack lowered himself down further, pushing past what he thought he could handle. An ache blossomed inside his gut, but the fullness, the feeling of it was tantalising and Jack wanted more.

He didn't stop until Pitch was fully seated, then needed a minute to catch his breath. Pitch lifted the



hand on his hip and stroked his back with a shaking, open palm.

‘I’m gonna-’ *come*, Jack thought, and then opened his mouth on a cry. They’d been having a conversation. ‘I’m gonna make a place, near here. I want to be- I *want*.’

Jack shook his head. He ground out a groan of frustration.

‘This really is a conversation for later,’ Pitch said suddenly, his hand squeezing around Jack’s cock, and Jack nodded fervently.

With that, Pitch returned his hand to Jack’s hip and began encouraging him to move in earnest. And Jack, wanting to come, wanting to drag Pitch along with him, moved up and down, feeling like he was melting. There was friction despite the lube, it wore at him, made him feel over-sensitive, and he was panting, pressing open-mouthed kisses against Pitch’s skin. Pitch, against him, was shaking already.

It was Pitch who decided when it should end. Pitch who started moving his hand rapidly over Jack’s length while thrusting up hard and claiming him, causing Jack to shout out as his mind went white and he came hard. And it was Pitch who stroked him through his release, until Jack was whimpering and sensitive and still bearing down on Pitch’s cock, until Pitch removed his hand and pressed it – sticky with cold fluid – against Jack’s other hip and started moving Jack at a faster pace against him, until not more than a minute later, Pitch pressed up deep inside of Jack, finding more space for himself so that Jack squeaked at feeling so *full*. Pitch came with a short, intense groan.

Jack could feel it, liquid warmth inside of him, and he moaned.

Pitch tilted backwards, wrapping both of his hands around Jack and keeping their hips together as he dragged Jack down to the bed with him, legs splayed over Pitch’s hips, Pitch warm inside of him, prevented from slipping out. He kissed Jack with a lazy, hungry warmth.

‘You should get some sleep,’ Pitch breathed against his skin. ‘You’re going to need it.’

Jack wriggled against Pitch’s hips, making both of them shudder out exhailes.

‘Maybe you’re going to need it too,’ Jack said, impish, and Pitch bit his lower lip gently, sucking it into his mouth.

They kissed until Jack’s lips were bruised and swollen. Until Pitch finally slipped out of him and he turned over and pulled Jack into his body so that he could surround him with arms and heat, until Jack began to forget what his regular body temperature was.

He liked the way Pitch’s heat leaked through him. He was beginning to associate it with a feeling of being home, of being wanted.

Once upon a time he’d gained a human believer in Jamie, he’d been *seen*. And since then, he’d learned the different ways people could see him. Humans, Guardians, other spirits. But no one saw him like Pitch did, and Jack doubted that anyone else ever would.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘The Lighthouse in the Woods,’ Jack is finally able to build his home, with Gwyn’s assistance. Jack makes more progress in healing, and comes to a

realisation about what he wants for himself in his future.

# The Lighthouse in the Woods

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Another two weeks passed.

Jack and Pitch spent increasing amounts of time in Kostroma. They'd never continued the discussion that Pitch had started in his bed, but there seemed to be an implicit understanding now that Jack was welcome to stay even when Pitch wasn't there. But for all that Jack loved the house in Kostroma, for all that it felt like home, it was undeniably Pitch's space, and Jack still wanted to put Patty's illustration up on his own wall, in his own home.

He wanted a space that would be his.

Pitch began to teach him the lunar alphabet, which was complex and pictographic. It was an innovative alphabet, allowing for the constant invention and addition of new pictograms.

'How did you ever remember it all?' Jack said, and Pitch traced his finger over the pictogram on his axe that represented his daughter; a five pointed star with five small circles at each of the points.

'We weren't required to learn each other's personal pictograms, unless there was reason to. But you did develop a knack in picking up the symbolic language of others. Sandy talks in personal pictograms and universal symbols both, and he is easy enough to understand.'

Pitch had to keep his teachings short, because Jack still lost his concentration frequently. Sometimes he would become lulled by Pitch's voice, think about his bedroom voice, and simply crawl across the table or across the chair, and distract him with kisses or touching or anything else that another might consider inappropriate, but that Pitch always considered a welcome distraction.

Pitch was spontaneous, and his habit of sometimes sneaking up on Jack and seducing him from behind, or dragging him into a dark space and pinning him up against a wall, or a tree, continued. It turned out that was simply Pitch's *style*. And Jack found that not only didn't he mind, but there was a sense of fun, of play about it. Where Jack was too overwhelmed, or too frightened, Pitch backed off immediately; though that happened less often now.

He realised he was free to choose fun if he wanted, free to choose resolve, free to step into Pitch's arms or to back away and say that he needed space.

It helped, too, that Pitch never minded when Jack simply left. Jack spent three nights resting in tree boughs, staring up through the canopy into the stars, Mora sleeping nearby.

Mora divided her time between Sandy's cloud at North's Workshop, and Jack. She, too, would simply wander off if she became bored, or wanted to do something different. Jack thought it was healthier for her to not be so attached to him, and though they were still close friends, he was glad that she was friends with Sandy and Pitch too.

Pitch hadn't talked seriously about his centre since North had shared it with him. For the most part, he was obnoxious about it, which affirmed Jack's private thoughts that North had possibly told him too soon. He suspected that Pitch was uncomfortable having a centre that didn't validate his own hatred of himself.

Pitch would make peace with it in his own time.

On a crisp, Saturday morning, Jack shifted on a tree bough, legs swinging on either side of it. He watched a wolverine in the snow beneath him, digging up some small animal's burrow beneath the snow, looking for food. It growled and worked fiercely, fur shivering down its body with each powerful, muscular movement. Jack yawned and looked up into a pale blue sky.

Pitch was away. He'd gone back to Pemberton to see if it was a residence he wanted to keep, and he'd said that he needed to do it on his own. That had been a day and a half ago, and Jack wondered if Pitch had slept there, was grieving, was wandering through a forest on his own, lost in his thoughts.

He decided it was as good a time as any to make his home.

Jack folded his fingers around the blue piece of metal and thought a simple message to Gwyn, and waited.

The wolverine had long since disappeared – having caught and eaten its prize – when Gwyn turned up at the base of the tree. He looked around, and then looked straight up and waved when he saw Jack.

Jack shifted to float down to Gwyn, and was surprised when Gwyn jumped onto one of the lower, thicker branches, and then started bodily pulling himself up the tree. The tree was large enough, the branches sturdy enough to support his weight, and Gwyn settled himself easily on one of the branches just below Jack, leaning against the trunk, looking up at him curiously. He wore a pale blue shirt that matched his eyes, dark brown pants, and lace-up, pale leather boots. His hair had been cut shorter since the last time Jack had seen it, though it was still unruly.

'You climb trees better than a lot of the kids I meet,' Jack said, and Gwyn nodded and didn't offer an explanation.

'Can you feel the difference between this world and the otherworld?' Gwyn asked, and Jack frowned at him. 'Can you tell the difference between the Seelie Court, or North's Workshop, and...your old cabin, or Pitch's home in Kostroma? Pitch lives in the human world, in a home cloaked with magic designed to hide it from sight. It should feel different to the energy of the Seelie Court, the Workshop, Aster's Warren.'

Jack shook his head, eyes widening. He couldn't tell the difference at all.

Gwyn's brow furrowed for a moment, as though vexed. He stood up on his tree bough and reached a hand out to Jack.

'Here,' Gwyn said. 'Let me show you. Place your palm in mine.'

Jack paused, having no idea what to expect, and then reached out and did as Gwyn asked. Gwyn's skin was surprisingly hot, almost as warm as Pitch's, and Pitch ran warmer than anyone Jack had ever met. Gwyn's fingers closed around Jack's hand, and Jack made a small sound when he felt a sudden shift of energy around him.

He was in the forest in Kostroma, even in the same tree, but...

It was different. The trees were richer, more lustrous somehow. The foliage was greener. And beneath him was a small flock of pale white reindeer, their antlers glowing silver. They weren't from the mundane world, but touched by the fae. Gwyn let go of Jack's palm, and Jack stared around, mouth dropping open.

‘This is the other world,’ Gwyn said, quietly. ‘One of them, anyway. This is the one most of the fae occupy. If you didn’t know this is where most of us like to live, it would go a long way to explaining why you’ve hardly been seen by us for so long. Fae do not like to be seen by humans. We live here and cross over when we have to. Can you not feel the difference? You’ll need to. You cannot build your home in the human world like Pitch has.’

Jack swallowed and kept staring at the world around him. He thought, maybe, he could tell the difference. There was a strange eldritch energy. Now that he thought about it, he was reminded of how elusive the wind was when he asked it to take him back to North’s Workshop. It wasn’t like the other breezes. It was a strange wind.

On a whim, Jack called up a bevy of breezes and winds to himself, ruffling his and Gwyn’s hair and clothing, and held his fingers out to them. He closed his eyes and felt them all.

They each had that strange feel to them. And amongst all of the breezes, he felt a single, bold wind that clearly came from the human world. Jack opened his eyes wide. He couldn’t *feel* the difference in energy in perhaps the way Gwyn could, but Jack could tell the difference in the winds. He hadn’t realised that the contrast meant two different worlds.

‘The fae live in a world that rests over and beneath the human world,’ Gwyn said. ‘In the human world, North’s Workshop is simply a snow-covered cliff that no one visits, because the energy is off-putting. North didn’t do that deliberately, it is simply how it sometimes goes when you create a large fae habitation. North isn’t fae, but as a Guardian, he knows how to move between worlds. Perhaps because you are trapped between Guardian and fae, these things are harder for you to sense.’

‘I can tell it now,’ Jack said. ‘The winds are different.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn nodded, ‘they are. Now. Shall we find a location?’

Jack realised what Gwyn was asking. He thought perhaps they’d talk about it more first, that Jack would design blueprints or...

He realised he had no idea what to expect.

Gwyn offered him a tired smile.

‘You’ll know,’ Gwyn said. ‘Off you go then. Find a location you like, and I’ll teleport to you. I expect it will be in this forest. A frost spirit before you once lived here.’

‘Seriously?’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded and waved him off.

Jack slipped off the tree bough and into the air. He shot off above the treetops.

Jack didn’t know what he was looking for. An hour passed before Jack slowed down around a huge, circular stand of trees. These ones were larger than the rest and they had a good, welcoming feel about them. He dropped down into the forest itself and looked around. It looked like regular forest now, and he checked the winds to make sure he hadn’t slipped back into the human-world by accident.

Hoping he was doing the right thing, he slipped his fingers around the blue metal, and called Gwyn again.

Gwyn teleported next to him in an instant and looked around, speculatively. He then dropped to one knee and pressed his hand down firm against the ground, and closed his eyes in concentration.

Jack felt nothing for a few seconds, and then he grimaced when he felt a weird encroaching of energy on his body. It passed through him, but Gwyn didn't move for several minutes. When he stood up, he wiped his hand off on his shirt, leaving a small dirt stain, and nodded.

'Whoever was here has left,' Gwyn said. 'Trees this healthy have usually been tended to; perhaps by dryads or other fae. Perhaps August's constant surveillance of Kostroma put them off.'

Jack blinked to hear August's name.

'Is he...is he awake?' Jack said, hesitant, and Gwyn nodded absently, and then seemed to realise who he was talking to. He turned to Jack and frowned.

'Conscious, and still in the cell. He has no visitors. He is weakened by no access to food or water. He has not tried to escape.'

Gwyn's tone was firm and Jack could tell the subject was closed, not because Gwyn didn't want to talk about it, but because Gwyn didn't think there was anything to worry about. Jack turned back to the forest and shrugged helplessly.

'I have *no* idea what I'm doing,' Jack said, and Gwyn nodded, the expression on his face easing as his forehead relaxed.

'This is the part I can help you with. Each spirit has an ability to tap into their core strength in a way that allows you to create a permanent home. Its permanency is fixed with a combination of your magic, and the otherworld choosing to hold together for you. I will need both of your hands this time. I think I can awaken it in you, since you do not know how to reach it yourself.'

Jack raised his eyebrows at that, and Gwyn simply smiled.

'The King of the Seelie Kingdom has to be good for something,' he said, wry. 'It might as well be this.'

Jack placed his hands in both of Gwyn's, and then felt a shift of energy inside himself again. It shifted, curious, and then he felt the oddest sensation of something *knocking* against his frost. It didn't feel invasive, just very weird. Jack opened his mouth to comment on it, when Jack felt a power rock through him that spoke of transformation, of growth, of *home*. It twined up with his ice, and Jack could feel it in the world around him, in the trees, the ground.

Suddenly he knew what his home looked like. He realised he had known for years and years. He could feel a need to create it spilling from his fingertips, and Gwyn let go of Jack's hands immediately and stepped back, a slow smile moving across his face.

'What did you do?' Jack said.

He could feel the fae world itself reach towards him with invisible fingers. It was as though the trees wanted to bend and shift to Jack's will. As though the ground wanted to become the structure for his home. The land itself felt *friendly*, felt like it wanted to join with Jack's power and create something that would last through the ages.

Gwyn shrugged.

'You can take it from here,' Gwyn said. 'I'll stay nearby, just in case, but I believe your innate instincts are there.'

Jack waved his staff and instead of creating frost, the tree next to him grew thicker, stronger

branches, twisted up to the sky.

‘Just like that, huh?’ Jack said, and Gwyn nodded.

‘You can *only* use this depth of your magic for the construction of your home. I will be nearby at a safe distance. Fae who are in the middle of constructing their home often enter an altered state of consciousness. If you cannot find me once you are finished, call me again. Do you understand?’

Jack nodded, and Gwyn teleported away.

Jack waited for several slow, deep breaths. He stared around him. He’d never felt anything like this before. It was at once alien, yet familiar, as though the land was whispering to something ancient inside of him, and something in his frost whispered back.

It was the trees he spoke to first. The large, friendly trees that grew even taller, latticed their branches together for him, created the base of his home. Branches twisted and curved together like snakes, created flat levels for walking, walls to create an enclosed shelter, a veranda, banisters, railings, stairs, landings.

And that was when Jack realised he was trying too hard.

He paused, hovering. He could feel it; whatever altered state of consciousness Gwyn was talking about. It knocked at the back of his mind, asked politely but insistently for entry.

Jack, hesitantly, let it in, and felt his consciousness tumble down into the core of his ice.

After that, he had no idea what he was doing. He let the magic do what it needed to, and he flew in service of it. He used his staff, his hands, even his feet to direct it. He spoke to ice, to frost, to snow, to wood and leaves, to the ground itself. He had the sense of being up very high, and other times he could feel himself running across the forest floor, everything filtering through in small flashes of colour.

There, sunk deep in his core, he saw how powerful he truly was, and it shook him. Gwyn was right, he could never let his power loose as he wanted. It was too dangerous.

But eventually even awareness of that disappeared, and he lost all sense of himself.

Jack knelt on the forest floor, exhausted, when he could think in sentences again, he felt himself detach from the core of his ice. He fumbled for the piece of blue metal without really thinking about it, summoned Gwyn, and then rested his head on the ground, smelling dirt and loam.

The world felt normal again. Whatever Gwyn had opened inside of him had closed quietly, and Jack felt like himself.

Jack startled when he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. He looked up, and Gwyn crouched by him. Jack hadn’t even heard him approach.

‘You’ll sleep well, tonight,’ Gwyn said. And then he arched his neck back and looked up, looked up past the treetops at something Jack hadn’t seen.

Jack’s eyes flew open and he jumped up immediately.

He gasped at what he’d created.

He shot up into the air, past three stories of treehouse. The living treehouse itself had formed walls,

huge arching windows, a veranda on one of the upper levels, a porch that was half-covered with canopy. Branches grew from the gutters and the wooden downpipes, leaves and twigs unfurling cheerfully outwards, creating the sense of something hidden; even though there was no way of hiding anything so huge. It was frosted with tiny, sparkling pieces of ice, curling around the branches in different, spiralling patterns. Some were huge, spanning an entire storey. Others were smaller and more intimately creative. There was a particularly artful series of tiny spirals on a banister. They showed no signs of melting, and if Gwyn was right; they'd never melt.

Above it, attached to the treehouse, having laid down several roots of solid ice, was a towering edifice of clear, blue ice. It was a tower, a sculpture more than a home. It was broad at the base, and then tapered out unevenly all the way to the top, as though an ice sculptor had turned an icicle upside down, made it gigantic, and added fixtures and floors and decorations to it. And at the very top, catching the sunlight and refracting rays of afternoon light, was a jagged, multi-pointed star that looked as though it had been constructed by fusing together several unevenly grown icicles. Except the icicles were huge; at least fifty metres long. Jack had the vaguest memory of creating panes of flat, clear ice like glass in the middle of the star to capture sunlight and turn it into a beacon.

The whole structure smelled fresh, cold, like the middle of winter, the best parts of snowstorms. Beneath it, something woodsy and redolent of freshly overturned earth. Jack ran his hands along the ice, tried scoring it with his fingernails and he couldn't. It would never melt. It didn't matter how high the sun rose or how warm it became.

It was like remembering a distant, forgotten dream. He'd seen this once, but had no idea what it was. He'd dreamed it. And they were exciting dreams. Dreams of waking up in a tower of ice and sliding down the outside, only to hook himself on one of the ice protrusions and fling himself laughing out into the wider world, ready to make mischief.

Jack flew back down to Gwyn's side, and Gwyn was still staring up at the home itself, satisfaction on his face.

'I have someone to introduce to you,' Gwyn said, and Jack's eyes widened as Gwyn beckoned forth a trow. Jack recognised the trows, he'd seen them in the Seelie Court often, and he liked them a great deal, unlike North's elves, who drove him kind of crazy. The trows were about two to three feet tall, and far more helpful than the elves, with earnest dark eyes and skin that ranged from grey to dark grey in shade. Their faces were made of wrinkles – even the young ones – and their fingers were spindly; clever and vulnerable.

'Hi,' Jack said, waving. The trow blinked at him, seriously. It waved a brief hello.

'They don't really talk,' Gwyn said. 'Also they're somewhat shy. But they'll help you in exchange for a home. They will maintain the upkeep, find furniture for you, keep your house looked after. They're very willing and require a living wage, which I will pay for as long as they keep you company. Which I hope will be a very, very long time.'

Jack stared at him, mouth dropping open. Gwyn averted his eyes, pale cheeks staining pink.

'I did say I would help you build your home. But a home needs looking after, and fae homes are large and unwieldy; it is better to have help. The only thing to remember is that they steal anything that is made of pure silver. They cannot help it, and you had best accept this about them now. It would be a kindness of you to leave it lying around sometimes. You cannot gift it to them directly, but if you leave it lying around for them to steal, they will know it as a gift and work harder for you. Some are literate, and all will work very hard. There's a team of ten who come from colder climes who I thought would be a good fit for you.'



'I...' Jack stared as the trow simply ran towards Jack's home, running up onto the wooden veranda and then slipping in through a circular front door and closing it behind him. 'This is too much.'

'The Nightmare King wouldn't be vanquished without your assistance,' Gwyn said, spreading his hands. 'There is no 'too much' that I could offer in thanks. Although, I will say formally that this discharges my debt to you.'

Jack shook his head and stared up at his home again. His *home*.

'I don't know what I did. I don't even know what it is,' Jack said. 'The treehouse part, sure. It's a treehouse. But that? The ice bit? It's huge!'

Gwyn stared up at it speculatively, and then shrugged.

'I think it looks like a lighthouse, if you ask me.'

'But it's not by the sea. Also it doesn't really look like a lighthouse.'

'The star at the top catches the sunlight. It burns very brightly. It looks like a place that lost spirits might use as a marker to find their way home again.'

Jack's brow furrowed at that interpretation. He stared up at it. He hadn't thought about it that way. But if he could see it, then other fae could see it. He hoped that other fae might perch on the higher parts, might see the star and remember it as a light by which to find their way home.

'But...'

'Maybe after so long of not having your own lighthouse, your own anchor in this world, a part of you decided you might provide it to others.'

'Oh,' Jack said, eyes widening.

'I quite like it,' Gwyn said. 'It has presence.'

Gwyn scratched at the back of his head and then looked around.

'I've spent too long here today. I need to get back. I may not be able to see you for a little while. But I would like to return.' He paused, looked down at the forest floor for a moment, and then looked up again. 'I am grateful that I met you and Pitch. Quite grateful.'

There was something painfully awkward about him, in that moment. Something that reminded Jack that he came from a difficult family, that he commanded a Kingdom he didn't want. Jack smiled back at him. He didn't know if he was grateful; not with the chaos that the fae world had brought into his life. But he was pretty sure he liked Gwyn.

'*Gramerci*, Jack. Farewell.'

Jack watched as he disappeared into light. Jack was left standing in a forest, beside his home.

Now that he knew the secret of slipping between the worlds on the winds, Jack slipped out of the otherworld and into the human world easily. He followed the bolder winds all the way back to Pitch's home, looked behind his shoulder frequently, surprised that he couldn't see the giant ice construction that he'd made. Every now and then he followed an otherworldly wind into the fae world, just to see it.

He loved it.

He had no idea he could create something like that, but there it was. It was his, and he felt proud.

He couldn't wait to show Pitch.

\*

Jack buzzed with excitement when Pitch returned the next morning. He shepherded Pitch out of his home, pushing him with two hands on his back, forgetting to say hello.

'I'm well, thank you. How are you?' Pitch said, dryly.

'How do you slip into the otherworld? How do you do it? Can you do it? Like right now?'

Pitch stared at him. Then his eyes widened in comprehension.

'While I was away? You made it while I was away?'

'You should probably move into the otherworld. However you do it,' Jack said, and absolutely *nothing* changed, except that Pitch suddenly saw the tower of ice in the distance and stopped moving. He raised a hand as though he was going to point at it, and then turned a smirk at Jack.

'I'd say you were overcompensating, but I think we both know that's not true.'

'Yeah, you're not as funny as you think you are,' Jack said, rolling his eyes. 'Can we go? I haven't even seen the inside of it yet. Well, not the treehouse part. Can we teleport there?'

'There's a *treehouse* part?' Pitch said, even as he wrapped his arms around Jack and stared at Jack's home with a calculating gaze on his face. A moment later darkness enclosed them.

They landed outside of Jack's home, and Pitch separated from Jack and stared at the trees that had bent and altered themselves for the treehouse levels. He walked over and moved his palm along some of the frost spirals, without actually touching them. And then he pressed his hands against the wood and smiled.

'You haven't seen the inside of it yet? Perhaps you should go first,' Pitch said.

It was like entering a friendlier part of his unconscious mind. The part that could accept good dreams and wanted enjoyment and relaxation. The first level, covered in living floorboards, already had several small footstools and a small table. On it, a candelabra filled with the guttering light of candles that had nearly burnt out. Two trows were sitting on the footstools, poring over a parchment with hand-painted illustrations of furniture on it.

They looked up when Pitch and Jack entered, and both of them hopped off the stools immediately. They looked embarrassed at having been seen.

'No! It's cool! It's cool, honest!' Jack said, holding up his hands.

One of the trows looked down at the parchment, then came over and handed it to Jack. In Jack's hands, the parchment lengthened, and Jack stared at a huge roll of parchment covered in many different furniture designs. He didn't know how it was possible, but he liked *all* of them. He liked the different table designs, the bed designs, *everything*. It was almost like the parchment had been bewitched to...

Jack stared at it, then stared at the trow.

'Huh,' he said. 'I like all of it.'

The trow nodded, and Jack passed the parchment back to him. The trow took the parchment carefully, and instead of shrinking back to its original size, it stayed large and the other trow came over to see, ears pricking up in excitement, fingers already pointing at the new selection.

‘You guys can pick whatever you like, okay?’

‘What about payment?’ Pitch whispered to him, and Jack grinned.

‘Gwyn’s bankrolling the whole thing.’

The trow had gone off with the now unwieldy piece of parchment, and they must have been silently talking amongst themselves, because they seemed to be having an argument over different items of furniture. A moment later, the trow not holding the parchment shoved the other trow hard, and then disappeared with a *Pop!* The second trow’s face scrunched up in anger and he disappeared too.

‘Come on,’ Jack said, ignoring the mixture of alarm and amusement he felt at the idea of sharing his home with the trows.

The small, enclosed room they had first entered was something of a false alarm. As soon as they walked beyond it, the whole house opened up. There were spaces in the floors so that Jack could simply fly up and down through the levels at will. There was a spiralling staircase that made its way broadly all the way up to the ice tower that Jack could see above, blue and beckoning. There were doorways leading off one of the walls into different, empty rooms, and another wall of empty, living bookshelves on the second level, decorated with foliage.

‘I don’t...read much?’ Jack said, to himself. ‘What’s up with that?’

‘Maybe you will,’ Pitch said.

‘O-kay,’ Jack said, shaking his head, a little dazed.

It was like walking through a part of his own mind. He’d been here before, in some ways, but never like this. He was learning things about himself that he didn’t know. He preferred circular windows and arched doorways. He liked banisters and railings everywhere, because it gave him something to hook his staff on when he was flipping and tumbling his way through the air. He liked a huge bedroom, which looked – Jack realised – a little like a mirror of Pitch’s bedroom in Kostroma. It turned out that he liked fireplaces, even though fires were too hot to be comfortable for long.

They made their way up the spiral staircase, until they reached the tower of ice. The sound changed immediately. From the dull thud of Pitch’s boots on wood, to a clearer, ringing note. Pitch looked down and made a sound of surprise.

‘What?’ Jack said.

‘You’ve given the spiral staircase grip so that anyone else walking up these stairs –it’s not likely to be you – won’t slip.’

Jack switched to floating, and Pitch kept walking upwards until he reached a clear landing of ice. He stepped onto it cautiously, and looked around.

Jack stared into the blue and white of the ice layers above him and felt like he was in the middle of an iceberg. It was meditative, and Jack felt something in himself settle as he looked up.

‘Jack?’ Pitch said, and Jack looked over at him.

‘Yeah?’

‘Lost you for a minute there,’ he said, and Jack blinked at him. ‘You lost track of time.’

‘Oops,’ Jack said, grinning. ‘Maybe we should go back down, because otherwise I’m just going to stare at this for a really long time.’

\*

They ended up on the level of the treehouse where Jack’s bedroom was. There was no furniture in the room yet. A few branches grew out of the walls, leaves curling glossily into the room. Pitch leaned back against the wall, and Jack leaned back against Pitch, supported between his splayed, bent legs.

‘I like it,’ Pitch said. ‘I’d like it more if it had furniture, but this is good too. It has a nice feel to it.’

‘You’d stay here sometimes? The cold doesn’t bother you too much?’

‘The cold doesn’t bother me. I also noticed fireplaces.’

‘Yeah, they’re made out of wood that’s alive. I’m pretty sure they’re just for show,’ Jack said, wincing.

Pitch laughed quietly and wrapped one of his arms around Jack’s torso.

‘How was Pemberton?’ Jack said, and Pitch took a deep breath and sighed it out.

‘I’d like to spend some more time there. I’d like to try and make more good memories there than bad ones. You could help me, if you like. I could tell you enjoyed it, despite the heat. It’s lovely in winter. They don’t get snow, of course, but it’s chilly and it rains a lot, and mist rolls through the forest.’

They both drifted into silence, as they often did. Jack was used to spending years alone, invisible, silently watching the world around him. He was used to observing and letting his thoughts drift. And it seemed that Pitch was the same. The silences were comfortable, and Jack never felt like he was expected to fill them with chatter.

Jack relaxed more against Pitch’s chest, and started stroking his fingers over the back of Pitch’s hand.

After a while, he picked up Pitch’s hand again with both of his, and then raised it slowly, telegraphing what he was doing so that Pitch would have time to pull away. But Pitch didn’t pull away, and Jack slowly settled Pitch’s hand in his hair.

Jack tensed a little, but he was surprised at himself. No distant memories prickled at his skin.

Jack let go of Pitch’s hand slowly, lowering his arms and feeling the warm weight of Pitch’s palm on his head. Jack could feel Pitch’s breathing shallow in his chest, as though he could hardly believe it. Jack wondered what his own fears were doing. They couldn’t have been too bad, or Pitch would have stopped.

Pitch shifted his hand on Jack’s scalp, and Jack shivered, but didn’t feel anything like ghost hands.

Jack leaned harder against Pitch, indicating that he was okay.

Pitch lifted his fingers and lowered them again, gently carding Jack's hair. And then he dropped his fingertips down to Jack's scalp and dragged four, warm lines across his head.

Jack swallowed, made a small, warm sound in his throat.

Pitch sighed out a huge breath, and then dropped his hand down to Jack's ear, stroking the curve of his skull behind it, where it was hidden with hair. His skin was sensitive there, and Jack leaned into Pitch's hand, cat-like. Pitch hummed in approval and Jack exhaled a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

His eyes were closed. He'd *missed* this. The fact that they could do it again, that it was theirs, brought tears to his eyes. He brought his hand up and dashed them away, pressing his head back into Pitch's chest.

'I'm free to do what I want, right?' Jack said, and Pitch kept moving his fingers quietly over Jack's scalp. Jack took the silence as agreement.

'I could leave you,' Jack said. Pitch's hand stilled for a second, and then started moving again. 'I could travel. Whatever?'

'Yes,' Pitch said.

'And I'm free to spend the rest of my life with you. Or...however long I have, right? If you're okay with it?'

'I have been 'okay with it' for far longer than you,' Pitch said softly.

'Then I want to live with you in Kostroma. And in my own place. And travel to that house in Pemberton sometimes. I want to see the mist and the kangaroos and go to that creek again. I mean, I probably won't be around all the time. But you don't seem to care about that? Which is good. That's really good. I'm feeling the need to travel like I used to. And I want to do that on my own or with Mora. But I want Kostroma and Pemberton to be where we live. Right? Do you want that?'

Pitch pressed his lips to the top of Jack's head and left them there.

'Very much,' Pitch said, against his hair.

'So I guess that makes our 'thing' kind of official then?' Jack said, and Pitch chuckled softly against his skin.

'You're hopeless.'

Jack smiled. He could see a future with snow days and flying through the winds and not feeling like he was tied down to any one person. A future with Pitch and the other Guardians in it. He still had a deep-seated uneasiness, but he knew now where that came from; too long being alone, too long being sure that he'd done something to deserve it.

Things were different now. He arched his head up into Pitch's hand, and Pitch ruffled his hair between his fingers affectionately.

'Hopeless and *mine*,' Pitch said, voice deepening.

Jack wanted to cup his hands around this new life and shelter it, so that it might grow stronger. And he felt like he could do that simply by learning how to travel again, by living in the quieter spaces with Pitch.

Jack went lax under Pitch's hand, smiled at the room. He liked the home he'd created. He couldn't wait to show the Guardians.

## Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'The Favour,' Jack visits the Nain Rouge to find out that not everything will resolve as neatly as he hopes, spends some time with the Guardians, and receives a request from Pitch which surprises him.

# The Favour

## Chapter Notes

Aaaand here we have it, the second last chapter! I hope everyone is going well, and thank you everyone for participating in this fic by reading, kudosing, commenting etc. You guys are the best.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pitch asked him not to go.

Pitch asked him not to go on his own.

Jack insisted. It was something that he needed to do. So it was that some time later he found himself in North America, moving through the damp, fetid levels of an abandoned, underground carpark.

He knew he was close when the amount of animal corpses on the ground multiplied. Rats, cats and dogs – some with collars and leashes still attached, even something that looked like it may have been human once. It reeked of decay, of death. Jack's skin crawled. He had almost forgotten, thanks to over a month of living a more pleasant life, the kinds of darknesses that still lived – active and unrestrained – in the world.

But he'd been meaning to pay a visit to the Nain Rouge for some time. She who had taken the bulk of his powers, knowing that it was a death blow. She who had killed Stacey at the gymnasium, and many other people over the thousands of years, the tens of thousands of years that she had been alive.

She might look like a child, she might talk like a street urchin, but she was neither.

Jack felt the ancientness of her in every fibre of his being, especially down here beneath the surface of the earth. He felt it in the same way that he knew – instinctively – that Makara was ancient, one of the Old Ones, too powerful to be allowed in the every day and therefore consigned to the dark.

He wondered if that was what inevitably happened to any fae that lived long enough; if they just became too powerful, too strong.

Jack moved past decrepit concrete pillars, floating with his staff out, the hair on the back of his neck standing upright. Last time he had been here, the Nain Rouge had helped him, attacked him, promised him a head-start, told him that his life-force tasted sweet.

He heard a tinkle of childish laughter in the distance and froze.

She knew he was there, even if she hadn't seen him yet. He had no idea where she was, and he tightened his grip on his staff.

Laughter again, this time closer and coming from the opposite direction. Was she teleporting? Was she sneaking up on him?

Perhaps he should have brought Pitch.

*Great, I went through everything I went through, only to be killed by the Nain Rouge. Dumb.*

'It's like *candy* just fucking went and grew legs and decided to walk on into my fucking home. Frosty, you got a deathwish? I can help you with that, if you like.'

Her voice sounded from behind him, behind a pillar, and he turned with a gasp. But she wasn't there.

'You smell like you've been slumming it with the dark,' the Nain Rouge said, this time from the opposite direction. 'Does he treat you mean, keep you keen? That's right, I remember now; you motherfucking shut that bitch up, didn't you? Got rid of that darkness. Just like you said you would. Gotta love a kid who keeps a promise.'

'Not really in the mood to be stalked,' Jack said angrily, and the Nain Rouge laughed from yet *another* direction.

'Then you shouldn't've come down here, shit for brains.'

Two clawed hands sunk hard into his shoulders and Jack had *no idea* how that happened, because he was still in the air, and then he was slammed down into the floor and the Nain Rouge – with her feral child's face that caged a monster, her opaque brown-crimson eyes – stared down at him and laughed through broken, blood-stained, rotting teeth.

'*Chillax!*' she said.

Jack shot ice at her even as his forearms iced up, hardened, and he followed it up with icicles that grew out of his fingers, flinging them at her as he jumped out of the way.

Already, she was stronger.

She jumped forwards once more, faster than should be possible, but the ice kept her back. She stopped, brushed icicles off the uncured animal pelts she wore, and then grinned, as though genuinely gleeful that Jack had fought.

'Ooh, Frosty, you're like *us* now. Too dangerous to be allowed.'

Jack shivered, eyes widening.

'You totes are,' she said. 'Look at *that*. You got your powers back and then some, huh? And you're only a baby little thing. What, few hundred years old? You know they get stronger with time, right? What are you gonna look like in five hundred years? A thousand? *Ten* thousand? Maybe one day they're gonna come after you. Maybe one day some young, jumped up fae is gonna get sick of what you become and end you. And then you can come to me, you pretty fucking thing, and I'll remind you of the rise and the fall.'

Jack had never forgotten.

A strange dread crept through him. An understanding. What *would* his powers look like as time ticked by? If they got stronger, would there simply come a point where he couldn't contain them anymore? Then what would he do? What would the others do?

The Nain Rouge scratched at the underside of her arm for several seconds, and then spread her arms.



‘What the fuck are you doing here?’

‘I want you to stay away from us. From the Guardians. From Pitch. I did what I said I’d do, I got rid of the Nightmare King. Not only that, but August is imprisoned, and I’m *sure* you weren’t impressed with him either, demoting you and taking you out of his Court.’

The Nain Rouge started to laugh.

‘The Nightmare King took the shadows and my power. August was just easy fucking prey. Like you, actually. Both naive as shit. But you did what you said, and I gotta hand it to you, I didn’t think it was possible. You fucking did it. Do you want me to slow clap it out? I already said I’d give you a head-start, what else do you want?’

‘Promise that you’ll leave us alone,’ Jack said, and the Nain Rouge laughed.

‘Nope!’

‘I’m serious, you-’

‘Yeah, the fucking answer’s still no, idiot. You’ll get your little head-start. I’ll give you cuties a few hundred years. Don’t worry, Frosty. I’m not just comin’ for you and your little buddies, I’m coming for *everyone*. It’s been a *long* time since the world had room for me. A *long* time. Those living shadows were greedy little fuckers, and once, oh...*once*...’

The Nain Rouge laughed in appreciation of what ‘once’ used to be, and the sound started out as childish, and ended a dark and twisted lament that crept through the bowels of the earth. The carpark shook around him.

‘Baby thing,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘You’ll be stronger anyway, by then. I’m sure you’ll give it a good fucking fight. You should enjoy it, y’know. You were supposed to die like any human; by accident, *whoops*. There’s not many fae who live more than a thousand years. Can’t look too far ahead in the future, nothing lives forever.’

‘That means you as well,’ Jack said, darkly.

‘Me as well,’ the Nain Rouge said, grinning. ‘You *are* fun, aren’t you? A free, fun, resolved little thing. Who would’ve thought that you could’ve done it? Killed a Nightmare King, got the vessel to fuck as a consolation prize.’

‘Are you underfae?’ Jack said suddenly, and the Nain Rouge’s eyes widened as though she hadn’t expected the question.

‘Oh, you fucking know about the caste system? But you don’t know about classless fae? Damn that’s some spotty education right there. Bitch, I’m outside the caste system. Too old. I’d like to see some young upstart King or Queen try and change *that* with a bunch of words.’

She laughed.

‘You thought that cuz’ I’d been demoted, it meant I was underfae, and you could kill me, huh? No such luck, I’m afraid. And I’ve gotta warn you, you’d better leave. You keep hovering there, smelling like cotton candy, and I’m gonna find a way to suck you dry even if I have to break all of you and leave you down here for a hundred years before I can do it.’

Jack shuddered, heard the seriousness in her voice. Her appetite still ruled her, always would, and he remembered that once she had said that she looked at people and saw a fuel gauge. He probably

looked pretty appealing, right now.

‘A head-start,’ Jack said, an affirmation of what she’d offered, and the Nain Rouge grinned a crooked smile at him.

‘If you get gone,’ she said. ‘Come down here for a spot of revenge? I killed one of your precious children? Frosty, my man, I’ve killed *so many* fucking children. They’re the sweetest. You think the Nain Rouge is my only name? I’ve visited children’s hospitals during epidemics. You would’ve been *mad*. You’re just upset because you saw a body. Bitch, shit happens. And me? I’m the shit.’

She pointed at herself for emphasis, and then scratched out tendrils of clumped, brown hair that had fallen out of a messy, makeshift bun.

Jack realised he didn’t want to stay anymore. He didn’t want to push his luck, he didn’t have anything else to say. Having a great deal more power only highlighted that he was still far, far behind many other fae and spirits in terms of raw power. He could feel her relentlessness, especially now that he was more sensitive to otherworldly energy. She might live in the human-world and prefer human sites of habitation, but there was nothing human about her.

Defeating the Nightmare King had been difficult.

Defeating the Nain Rouge might prove impossible.

Jack left and decided that if she turned up in his life again, he would deal with that when it happened.

He left and didn’t look back.

\*

Jack was ready to tell North that he was leaving the Workshop for good, but he decided to spend a couple more nights there for good measure. Pitch stayed in Kostroma, having made it very clear that now that he was settled in Russia, he had no interest in going back to that ‘cacophonous *mess*.’

On the second night, Jack woke only a few hours after falling asleep after a bracing nightmare. He couldn’t remember what it was about, but it left him gasping and clutching at his chest for several seconds, trying to remember where he was and why Pitch wasn’t beside him.

Jack looked up when Mora wandered over to him. She bunted her head against his chest and he looped his arms around her neck, pressing his forehead to the star on her head. She breathed warm gusts of air against him, and then bunted him once more, helping him wake up.

‘Let’s go flying,’ Jack said, wanting a distraction from the hammering dread in his heart. Mora whickered in approval.

They went on a brisk, speedy flight. Jack wanted to lose himself in the fastest winds, and Mora was happy to try and keep up. It was a wide, circular loop around the Workshop, and Jack spent an hour with Mora, reminding himself that he could do this now. Sometimes the nightmares made him forget that things were different. When Pitch wasn’t there, Jack needed to just get out, go flying, let the wide open sky remind him that he was free to do these things.

He saw a strand of dreamsand on his way back, glowing golden in the night, and he skimmed his hand across it. Golden dolphins sprang out of it, leapt alongside him, and then dove back into the sand.

Jack and Mora followed the dreamsand back all the way to Sandy's cloud. Mora dipped her hooves into the sand once, and Jack was surprised to see his own shape spring out of it, turning a quick, eager somersault before joining with the sand once more.

It hadn't occurred to him that Mora might also dream.

Sandy was awake on his cloud, creating constellations out of his sand as Jack approached. He made exclamation marks of delight when he saw Jack and Mora approaching, and jumped up from where he rested. When Jack landed lightly upon the cloud, he found himself with a handful of surprisingly heavy Sanderson, hugging him tightly.

Ever since North had seen Pitch embracing Jack easily, a rumour seemed to have spread amongst the Guardians that Jack was accepting touch again. And now he often found himself with a handful of Sandy or North no matter where he went. He didn't have the heart to stop them.

After a while, he actually kind of liked it.

He hugged Sandy back and sat down on the cloud, rubbing the warm grains of sand in his fingertips.

'I never asked,' Jack said, leaning back against a puff of cumulus, 'But what's it like now? I mean, obviously there are still nightmares in the world, but is it easier with the living shadows being gone?'

Sandy beamed at him, and then nodded. Jack felt a corresponding hope.

'Does that mean you won't always have to work as hard?'

Sandy's smile became even wider, which indicated *yes*. But he shrugged as if to indicate that one couldn't tell these things. Sandy trotted over and sat next to Jack, and then made a pictogram of a golden, fat little snowflake, and then a question mark.

'Uh, yeah,' Jack said, 'it is working. I don't remember the dreams though. Is that on purpose?'

Sandy pursed his lips and then nodded. He flashed up a picture of a double-bladed axe, and then a second question mark. Jack was certain that Sandy simplified the way he spoke for Jack's benefit, and Jack was grateful. The speedy rush of images that North was often subjected to were impossible for him to follow. He was getting better though, especially with learning the pictograms that Pitch was teaching him.

'He's...okay? He's dealing with a lot of stuff. He's a pretty reserved guy about it, but I can tell he's working through a lot. But I think overall he's okay.'

Sandy nodded in satisfaction.

'Oh, am I interrupting?' Toothiana swept over the cloud, Baby Tooth following, and Sandy and Jack shook their heads. Toothiana beamed, hugging Jack, then Sandy, and then kneeling on the cloud and pressing her hands to the warmth of the sand. 'I'll be leaving today when the sun comes up; need to get back to all the other Baby Teeth!'

Baby Tooth squeaked in agreement.

'I'm leaving today too,' Jack said, and Toothiana nodded. Sandy flashed up several different images and Toothiana squinted at them for a moment, before her eyes widened and her feathers flared in realisation.

‘In a week? You’re not staying for Christmas?’

Another flurry of pictograms, and Toothiana nodded.

‘He does get *very* busy, it’s true. We can all come back after Christmas, force the poor thing to take a break! You know that means something when *I’m* the one saying it.’

Jack smiled. All the Guardians probably worked a little too hard though, except for Jack. He shifted on the cloud, pressed his hands flat into the golden sand like Toothiana. It was one of the ways he sometimes felt separate from them. He couldn’t change his nature, but seeing how hard they all worked, how cheerfully...that could be difficult to take.

‘So you’re not out collecting teeth?’ Jack said, and Toothiana shook her head.

‘I’ve got my Baby Teeth on it tonight! I’ll go through and double check the memories when I get back, but they’re very good at what they do. They’re so helpful, my little sisterhood.’

She looked down at Baby Tooth, who was resting in the hands she now had facing palm upward on her lap, and Baby Tooth agreed with her, offering a cheerful expression.

‘You’re looking well, Jack,’ Toothiana said, smiling warmly. ‘It’s good to see. And Pitch? I’ve told him that he can come visit me at my home, whenever he wants.’

‘I think he will,’ Jack said. ‘He likes you. I think showing him that you knew how to work a cannon probably worked in your favour.’

Toothiana laughed.

‘Oh, that,’ she said. ‘Well someone had to break up all that *talking!* Pitch is nothing at all like the Nightmare King. I think we’ve all seen that now for ourselves.’

Sandy flashed up several images that Jack couldn’t even begin to read, and Toothiana shook her head in confusion. Sandy’s lips thinned, trying to think of a way to phrase what he was saying better, and then his face lit up with delight when North poked his head over the side of the cloud.

‘Ah! This is being where party is being started,’ North said, pulling himself onto the cloud and sitting down next to Jack. He rubbed at his eyes briefly, and then blinked up at the stars, smiling at them. ‘I am having good feeling about Christmas this year.’

‘Sure you are,’ Bunnymund called sceptically, before hopping onto Sandy’s cloud in a single bound. He rolled his eyes at North, even as he nodded a quick hello to Toothiana and Sandy. When he saw Jack, his eyes crinkled in a smile, and he held out a paw. ‘Come on, then.’

Jack flew up uncertainly, found himself pulled into a furry hug. It was brief but close, and when he withdrew and floated back down between North and Mora, Bunnymund smiled at him a while longer before sitting on his haunches next to Toothiana. He looked up at the stars too, ears twitching a few times, and then scratched at his side.

‘A good feeling about Christmas?’ Bunnymund said to North. ‘That’s what you say every year before the panic sets in.’

North laughed broadly, and didn’t disagree.

‘To be fair, the larrikin only panics for about two days before the ‘jolly good cheer’ kicks in, and all that,’ Bunnymund said conspiratorially to Jack, and Toothiana laughed.

‘It’s so true! But this is nice though. I don’t think it’s been the five of us for a while, has it? We should really do this more often.’

Sandy flashed up a pile of pictograms and North laughed.

‘Sandy is right! We say that all the time and we never do.’

‘Between Jack pissing off to do his own thing, me and Easter, Toothiana and all those damned teeth – overpopulation can’t be helping with *that* workload – Sandy and the dreams and North’s quest to make each Christmas more perfect than the last which – mate – we *talked* about that... It’s a damned hard thing to get our schedules organised.’

‘You could always use the emergency alarm to call everyone to the Workshop,’ Jack volunteered. ‘It’s not like the Nightmare King is around anymore.’

North looked at him in surprise, black, bushy eyebrows raised.

‘I am liking that idea,’ North said. Sandy nodded.

‘Will we still need the alarm, do you think?’ Toothiana said, pursing her lips, and North shrugged.

‘Anything is being possible. But you are knowing as well as I am, that the catastrophies are few and far between when the Boogeyman isn’t there creating them. It would be lovely to be calling the Northern Lights for getting together, instead of big drama.’

‘Our get togethers are big drama, sometimes,’ Bunnymund said, and Toothiana laughed.

‘Do you remember that time, oh, about four hundred years ago, when North wouldn’t let anyone else have the vodka?’ Toothiana laughed, and Bunnymund clapped North on the shoulder.

Jack looked between them.

He hadn’t been human then, let alone a Guardian. It reminded him that these four had stories. Reams and reams of stories.

He realised, as he watched Toothiana launch into a retelling of that Christmas, that even though his sense of distance from them still made him sad, it was okay. They tried to include him, and it must have been hard for them too. He was so different to all of them. They were gregarious, friendly, open people. And Jack was...that way with children, but he’d never learned how to do that with the Guardians.

And if Jack always felt a little separate, then so be it. Pitch likely felt the same way, given his history. And they had each other. He didn’t feel that same permanent sense of separateness or longing around Pitch anymore. He felt like they both understood each other. Like they finally had their club of two.

Jack had his own home now, and each of the Guardians had seen it. Even North had taken time out of his busy schedule, saying that he could use an excuse to fly the reindeer anyway. North had cried out in excitement. Toothiana had flitted all the way through the ice tower before she’d come back down citing that it was a little too cold, despite looking beautiful. Sandy had sent his dreamsand through the ice tower, making it a confection of ice and golden sand, and Jack could have sworn his home couldn’t have looked any better until Sandy played his sand through it. And Bunnymund had simply clapped a broad, heavy paw on Jack’s shoulder and said, ‘I’m proud of you, mate.’

And that, for some reason, had felt more warming than any other response he'd gotten so far from the Guardians.

He and Bunnymund didn't talk about Pitch. He suspected that Bunnymund was coming around. Their friendship was tentative, a hesitant creature that needed space and nurturing.

'I still remember the time that Toothiana skived off a night of collecting teeth and made all of us do it!' Bunnymund said, and Toothiana gasped in mock horror and pointed her finger at him.

'I was *sick!*'

'Excuses, excuses,' North said playfully, and Jack laughed, because that was something he *did* remember.

'Come on, Kangaroo, you don't remember turning into a little, tiny bunny rabbit? You were the cutest.'

'Oh my god he *was*,' Toothiana fawned, and Bunnymund's fur stood on end as Jack, North and Sandy started laughing. North with his booms of laughter, and Sandy with his silent belly-laugh.

'If only you are always being like this,' North said, and Bunnymund reached over and cuffed him with his boomerang.

'Oi,' Bunnymund said, but he smiled a second later. 'I am *adorable*.'

They laughed and the stories kept on flowing. Jack didn't have many stories with the Guardians yet, so he listened more than he talked.

At one point he felt gentle fingers on his back, and he looked up startled, to see North looking down at him, smiling. Jack smiled back. There was an understanding in North's eyes. Jack was surprised to see it. He shouldn't be, since North was more understanding these days, more willing to accept Jack for who he was, even though he was too busy to sit down and listen as often as he used to.

Jack thought that after Christmas probably, he would start visiting North more.

He wanted to get to know him a little better.

'I am going to miss you living here,' North said very quietly, as Bunnymund, Toothiana and Sandy were engaged in a loud debate about chocolate and healthy teeth, Sandy punctuating almost every picture with an exclamation mark.

'It's been pretty great, you giving us a home.'

'And an armchair,' North said. 'I am noticing these things.'

*Oops.*

Pitch had stolen it when he'd left. He'd simply wrapped his arms around the back of it, and dragged it through the shadows with him. It stayed in Pitch's room, they'd made use of it already.

'I am so *grateful*,' North said. 'Because I am thinking I see you better now, and you have taught me something of my own arrogance. I thought I was seeing you, but I was wrong. I am hoping you keep teaching me about yourself, Jack Frost. We are very lucky to have you as Guardian.'

Jack shifted uncomfortably.

‘You should go to your *real* home,’ North said, looking sidelong at the other Guardians. When he looked back at Jack, his eyes were wet. ‘The sooner you go, the sooner you can come back and visit. And you *must* stay again. Not this year, or next year, but I will have no refusal. Yes?’

‘Maybe in a few years,’ Jack said, smiling shyly.

‘Then go on,’ North said, patting him on the back. ‘I am knowing you don’t know how to say goodbye.’

Jack reached out with a hand and squeezed North’s arm tightly. His heart twinged with appreciation, and he stood up, trying not to let North’s shimmering eyes get to him.

He hopped up onto the winds, and Mora joined him.

‘Oh! Are you leaving?’ Toothiana said, and Jack nodded, smiling at them all. North was looking conspicuously down at his hands in his lap.

‘Yeah, for a little while! I’ll be back soon though! Until next time, yeah?’

‘Too right, mate,’ Bunnymund said, tipping an invisible hat. Toothiana waved. Sandy waved vigorously with both hands. And North, at the last moment, looked over his shoulder and winked in a way that was so classically *Santa*, Jack had to laugh.

He tumbled backwards into the wind and let it carry him away from the golden cloud of sand, from his fellow Guardians. He hitched up into the night sky, Mora choosing her own winds alongside him.

He had someone waiting for him at home.

\*

Jack woke to a hand on his shoulder gently shaking him. He blinked awake, early morning pre-dawn light – lavender-grey – sneaking into Pitch’s bedroom in Kostroma. Jack’s staff rested against the wall alongside Pitch’s axe, as it so often did these days. Jack sat up slowly. He’d come back and crawled into bed alongside Pitch, slipping under the blankets just to be closer to Pitch’s body temperature. Now he felt warm and pleasantly sleepy.

‘What is it?’ Jack said, yawning.

Jack woke up faster when he saw the strangely intent look on Pitch’s face. Jack sat up.

‘What’s wrong?’

Pitch stared a moment longer. He was already fully dressed, sitting on the side of the bed. He looked sideways, and Jack had the strangest feeling that Pitch was trying to summon his strength or gather himself together to be able to say something to him. It wasn’t something he was used to seeing. A burst of fear awoke inside of him, and Pitch looked back and grasped Jack’s hand in his own, squeezing it, face troubled.

‘Jack.’ Pitch looked down at the blankets, took several deep breaths. ‘I have a favour to ask you.’

The last remnants of sleep disappeared completely, Jack stiffened. Whatever it was, it was serious.

More time passed, it didn’t seem like Pitch would ever be able to ask his favour, and just as Jack was about to prompt him, Pitch’s face twisted with an internal anguish and he took a sharp breath.

‘Will you make her? Out of your frost?’

Jack didn’t know what he meant for several seconds, and then it hit him.

‘Oh,’ Jack said, his voice hoarse.

‘Please?’ Pitch said. ‘I have given this a great deal of thought. A *great* deal of thought.’

Fear pulsed through Jack’s body. The last time he’d done it, Pitch had been furious with him. It may have saved his life, but Pitch had been *furious* with him. What if he did it again, and Pitch changed his mind and then blamed-

‘Jack.’ Pitch reached out and took Jack’s wrist in his hand, curling his fingers around it. ‘It’s not like that, I promise. It is only that- I just think that perhaps if I might...’

Jack had never seen him so speechless before. Every word seemed to come from a deep, pained place. Pitch placed a fist over his heart and his shoulders bowed.

‘I will, of course, understand if you don’t want to,’ Pitch said. But when he looked up, a terrible hope on his face, Jack realised he couldn’t deny him. He worried that perhaps it was the wrong thing to do, but he couldn’t say no. He’d had his daughter’s visage forced upon him by the Nightmare King, even by Jack. It was only fair that when Pitch asked to see her of his own volition, Jack would say yes.

‘Come on,’ Jack said, sliding out of bed. He pulled on his pants, his sweatshirt, and then walked over to his staff and picked it up. Pitch watched him, wide-eyed.

‘I’m not sure I meant now,’ Pitch said, uncertain.

‘Come on,’ Jack said again, holding out his hand. ‘Before you chicken out. Let’s do this outside, it’ll be easier.’

Pitch stared at him for a long time, and then moved off the bed and paused before taking Jack’s hand in his own. Jack could feel the faintest tremor in Pitch’s fingers, and squeezed hard.

Pitch teleported them down into the shadows by the house. Jack’s hand tightened around his staff, he looked warily at Pitch. After all, Pitch still couldn’t look at the locket for too long without sinking into a bleak, disturbed mood. Pitch never brought her up in conversation if he could help it.

‘I’m worried about how this will affect you,’ Jack said quietly, and Pitch sighed out a long breath.

‘As am I,’ Pitch said.

‘So when you say you’ve given this a lot of thought, what does that mean? What are you thinking?’

Pitch leaned back into the wooden slats of his home and shook his head briefly, closing his eyes. The dawn was lightening from grey lavender to lilac. The sun would be up soon. Snow had freshly fallen overnight and was untouched by everything except the forest animals, paw prints showing up in its freshly laid surface.

‘I would like to see her image again. I’ve spent so long avoiding thoughts of her, and it’s occurred to me that I will never find anything like an end to this chapter of my life if I don’t at least...’ He made a sound of frustration. ‘The chapter will never really end. Perhaps I should say that the *story* won’t. But I cannot think on her as often as I would like. I avoid thoughts of her. And I think if she



were here, she would want me to be stronger, to at least be able to *think* about her willingly. I want to learn how. I was hoping this might...help.'

Jack absorbed everything and then his lips thinned on a frown. He thought he understood something of what Pitch meant, a glimpse of it. Going to Jamie's house had raised fresh memories of Jamie, had made the grief feel acute again, but if he hadn't done it, he wouldn't feel more settled about it now. It had become easier to think about Jamie, about his family, and he didn't regret revisiting that world again.

Jack floated out over the snow and Pitch followed him, boots compacting the freshly fallen stuff down. Jack sat and Pitch remained standing, nervous, smoothing over the embroidery on his robe. Jack looked at him and decided simply to start. They might as well find out now if it was a terrible idea.

It was easy to send forth the frost particles, he was so much stronger than the last time he'd made her out of his ice. And he still remembered the shape of her, he'd spent so long staring at the locket, trying to imagine her into existence, that his hands and fingers knew what to do, the frost knew how to fall into place.

Pitch gasped.

Jack opened his eyes slowly, his fingers splayed out in concentration. Seraphina stood several metres away, looking towards the tree line. Jack looked up at Pitch, heart trembling in his chest.

'Is...there anything I should change?' Jack said.

Pitch stared. One of his hands covered his mouth. He was paler than usual, and his eyes were so wide.

Jack's heart began to hurt.

'Pitch?'

'Her hair,' Pitch said, voice strained. 'Wavier. And her nose, more rounded.'

Jack made the changes, and then – as he had done with the frost Makara – tried to approximate movement. Frost Seraphina took a few hesitant steps towards the forest, and then turned back, looked over her shoulder.

Pitch made a tight, strangled noise that cut off in the back of his throat.

'Her steps,' Pitch said. 'She never quite ran in a straight line. And, she skipped more often than she walked.'

Jack bit his lower lip, focused on what he knew of children and their movement. How many children had he met who preferred skipping more than walking? Who never quite ran in straight lines? A ton. It was easy then, to find a sense of movement for her, and suddenly frost Seraphina stopped walking hesitantly towards the forest and turned around, half-skipping and half-running in a zig-zag, her face lightening with a smile.

Pitch took a step forward, both of his hands clutching hard over his heart.

'*There*,' Pitch breathed. 'There you are.'

He took another step forward, and then froze, visibly restraining himself.

'No, go on,' Jack said, voice shaking. 'Go over.'

Pitch looked down at Jack for only a second, as though that was all he could spare, and Jack wasn't surprised to see tears streaming down his face already. Jack's own heart twisted in his chest. His breath shook in his throat. He wanted to make sure he got Seraphina *right*, worried about Pitch, hoped this wasn't about to push Pitch into some massive, downward spiral.

Jack swallowed as he sent out piles of frost flowers to cover the snowy ground. And when Seraphina skipped her way to them, Pitch audibly swallowed down a sob. Seraphina landed on her knees, cupped her hands around one of the blossoms.

Jack impatiently wiped tears away from his face, because he needed to see what he was doing. After all, if this only happened once; if this was something that Pitch could only tolerate *once*, then it was something that Jack would do as well as he could.

The frost Seraphina plucked a flower and walked over to Pitch. They stared at each other. Seraphina smiled at him, and Jack could see Pitch's hands and arms shaking even from where he knelt on the snow. Seraphina couldn't offer the flower without its fragility being shattered, so Jack had her twirl it, and then tuck it behind her ear.

Pitch simply stared. He stared as though he would never get tired of looking, as though he could drink her image into himself and use it as nourishment. He had never seen Pitch look at *anyone* that way. Seraphina occupied a space in Pitch's heart that nothing and no one else would ever touch, and that was the way it should be. Jack swallowed the lump in his throat.

Jack had Seraphina whirl away to run back to the flowers, and he held his breath when Pitch lurched towards her, his whole body stumbling forwards. But then Pitch stopped, held his ground, and Seraphina came back and tumbled frost flowers all about his feet. If Pitch touched her, the illusion would disappear.

Pitch's mouth moved around her name, but Jack heard nothing at all, so he wondered if Pitch was whispering it, or saying it silently. Either way, Jack had Seraphina mouth 'Daddy' back, and Pitch's face crumpled, and he pressed his hands to his face.

He'd forgotten Jack was there, forgotten Seraphina was made out of frost. Jack could tell.

Frost Seraphina stood before Pitch and held out her hands slowly, palms up. It was inevitable that the illusion would eventually shatter. He didn't know if he could watch much more of this, he didn't think Pitch could handle much more himself.

Pitch moved his hands from his face, he looked down, trembling.

Pitch reached his hands out stiltedly to touch hers, and Jack knew, Jack knew that this was it.

His body tensed.

Pitch touched the palms of his hands so close to Seraphina's frost hands, but didn't actually make contact.

'I tried to do so well by you,' Pitch said, his voice breaking. Seraphina stared up at him, smiled. Jack wished she could talk, but that was far beyond his power. He wished that she could tell him that it was okay, and that she forgave him a long time ago, and that he didn't need to blame himself anymore, because he hadn't needed to blame himself in the first place.

Jack wiped his eyes again.

Jack rushed over even as something broke inside of Pitch and he lunged forwards, looping both of his arms around Seraphina and destroying the illusion. Pitch fell heavily to his knees and his shoulders heaved on huge sobs. Jack flew straight into his side and knocked him over, throwing his staff to the side so he could wrap both of his arms around him.

‘You did so well,’ Jack cried, as Pitch shook apart beneath him. ‘You did so well. You’re so brave.’

‘I just wish it could be *real*,’ Pitch said, his words breaking so often that Jack had trouble making them out.

Jack crawled over Pitch until he could press his face into the side of Pitch’s head. They were both crying. Pitch with the violent shudders of one close to keening out misery, and Jack silently, wishing his chest and throat would stop hurting.

Frost Seraphina was gone, scattered into particles. The flowers had disappeared. Jack’s concentration unable to keep track of it all.

Jack held Pitch through the shaking, the bitten off sounds in the back of his throat. He smoothed hands over his hair and cheeks, holding him as tightly as he could. Minutes crept on and on, and every time that Jack thought Pitch might be calming down, that his tears might be dissipating, Pitch would start shuddering anew.

Eventually, Pitch shifted one of his arms so he could loop it over Jack. He dragged him down and then curled around him, holding him so tightly that for a moment Jack thought that Pitch was pretending he was Seraphina.

‘Thank you,’ Pitch said, and Jack breathed out some relief. Pitch was at least coherent enough to know that it was Jack. ‘Thank you.’

‘Yeah? Are you sure?’

‘Thank you,’ Pitch whispered again. ‘I’m sure.’

‘I don’t think I can do that again for a while,’ Jack said, squeezing his eyes shut and flushing as he said it.

‘I don’t think I can do that again for a while either,’ Pitch said, and turned his face to kiss Jack’s cheek softly. His voice was still wrecked and wet, and Jack wanted to bury into him, to place the love he felt directly into Pitch’s heart.

‘Take it easy today,’ Jack said, and stroked his hair. ‘Maybe this week too. You did a really difficult thing.’

‘I’m exhausted,’ Pitch agreed. He sighed out a huge breath and then yawned. He reached up and wiped at his own face.

‘I wish I could’ve met her,’ Jack said softly, and Pitch smiled against his skin.

‘I wish she could have met *you*,’ Pitch said.

They didn’t let each other go for a long time. The sun was up above the trees when Pitch rolled back and looked at Jack with a wistful, longing expression on his face. He looked up at the sky, as though he could see his worlds and his life beyond it. Because he was Kozmotis too, Jack knew – someone who had hearkened from lands of complex cultures and laws and rulers, where babies

could be born with golden eyes and step into a destiny to fight the darkness.

He leaned up and pressed his lips to Pitch's mouth in a familiar, chaste kiss. A benediction and an offering.

Pitch traced his finger down the side of Jack's face with a tenderness that made Jack's heart hurt. He had never wished for someone like Pitch to come into his life, because he'd no idea what was out there, and he certainly never imagined it would come in the form of Pitch Black. It was even better, he decided, finding out there was more in the world than one could possibly ever wish for.

## Chapter End Notes

Only the epilogue left to go! Can you believe it? I still can't!

## Epilogue - From the Darkness We Rise

### Chapter Notes

Nina/Besteck did one of the most [amazing and detailed pieces of fanart ever, for this story](#), please go check it out. The time and love that's gone into it - I would have shared it sooner but it has spoilery content. But please, go enjoy it. And go enjoy her artwork, she is tremendous.

Acknowledgements (which are long) at the bottom, and all my thanks can be found there! You can always find me over at [Not-Poignant](#) at Tumblr, and I highly recommend you check out [the amazing fanart](#) that has been inspired by this fic over the months, because there are some wonderfully creative people out there. Now, go enjoy the epilogue!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

'I don't even understand why you're here,' Jack hissed. They were both huddled in one of the many underground tunnels that North's elves used to slink around the Workshop.

'Because I want to see this,' Pitch said, and Jack could hear the dark glee in his voice.

'Yeah, I'm doing it for *fun*, remember? To lighten up North a bit? You don't need to sound like I'm ruining his life or anything. You are a *total* creep.'

'*Excuse* me, but who was the one who decided to do this in the first place? It wasn't my idea. If you're not careful, North is going to end up with an Easter-sized grudge against you. You *do* remember that Easter, don't you, Jack?'

'Oh my *god*,' Jack hissed. 'Will you shut up? It's bad enough hearing about the first and second Easter I ruined from the Kangaroo, I do *not* need to hear it from you. I mean-'

Pitch kissed his way into Jack's mouth, sliding his tongue against Jack's, making his eyes drift shut. The combination of adrenaline and sensation combined in Jack's body, and he opened his mouth wider, moaning softly.

'There are *other* ways to shut up,' Jack gasped, shoving him.

'This is my favourite way,' Pitch said primly.

'The *worst*. You are the *worst*. No, get off, stop distracting me for like five seconds.'

It was two days after Christmas and Jack had organised for the Guardians to visit North. It was mostly to make sure that North wound down properly and didn't immediately launch into frenetic ideas for next year's Christmas. Everyone needed a break, and Jack was going to make sure that – visiting North being the perfect excuse – all of the Guardians got it. Even Bunnymund could do with a break. After all, it was still a few months away from Easter.

Besides, Jack had always wanted to do what he was about to do.

Jack made a small sound in the back of his throat when he found himself dragged forwards in the

small space by the hem of his hoodie. Pitch slanted his mouth over Jack's and thrust his tongue in deep, slowly sliding it back and forth, until Jack whined and clawed at Pitch's shoulders. Pitch hummed in rich approval, leaning forwards, licking the roof of his mouth. If there was one thing Jack had learned about Pitch, it was that Pitch had a high libido, and was very generous with touch.

*But seriously, Pitch, timing much?*

Jack whimpered when Pitch bit down on his bottom lip, and then gasped when lips found their way to the underside of his jaw and started to suck.

'No, oh my god, you're ridiculous!' Jack said, pushing at him until Pitch moved away, laughing under his breath.

'You told me to stop distracting you for five seconds. I waited ten. I was very generous.'

Jack kicked him.

'If North sees a hickey on top of everything else, he'll be pretty unhappy. He still thinks of me as some kid.'

Pitch muttered something under his breath about that, and then acquiesced and didn't kiss Jack again. Jack couldn't tell if he felt happy or disappointed about that.

Probably both.

'So,' Pitch said, 'the plan is that I wait in my old room, provided it's not been used as storage for *something*, and then what?'

'I don't know, you're not part of the plan, I just wanted you here,' Jack said, frustrated. He hadn't really thought it through. It was hard enough organising the other Guardians to come and stay in the Workshop and make sure that North stopped working.

'I can make myself a part of the plan,' Pitch said, with that sort of silky, faux helpfulness that made Jack's gut clench. He wasn't entirely surprised at his reaction. That tone of voice was often a prelude to many *other* sorts of activities that left Jack a combination of pleased, distracted, aroused, sore and exhausted.

'You're meant to make sure that North doesn't kill me,' Jack said, and Pitch sighed.

'Then I am sorry to inform you, but we're both screwed.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, grinning. 'We are.'

With that, Jack wriggled away from Pitch through the tunnel, dragging his staff with him, ready to execute what was perhaps one of his craziest plans since that exciting, if hampering, ice-heavy Easter that Bunnymund *still* couldn't stop referring to.

His centre might not be fun anymore, but if anything, combining his old centres of resolve and fun made him a little more mischievous than he used to be when the mood took him. Also, living with Pitch's dark streak didn't help. It also turned out that Mora could be a prankster. The three of them living with each other was a catastrophe-in-waiting.

Jack was smaller and faster than Pitch, and he left Pitch down in the shadows to sort himself out while he crawled his way free into an empty fireplace and then poked his head out of it, making sure no one was around. Aside from two elves who waved at him absently before going back to

fighting each other, no one was in the room he entered.

The Workshop was definitely quieter than usual, but Jack could still hear the sounds of toys, of yeti working. They were supposed to be on *holiday*. North was terrible at making sure he and everyone else took breaks.

Jack crept through the room, out of the door, and then shot up through the centre of the Workshop all the way to the top. He looked down through the many levels, adrenaline racing through him. Yeti had spotted him now, and several had rumbled out warnings to each other.

Then the yelling began.

Jack was always welcome in the Workshop, but for some reason the yeti could always tell when he was up to something.

He had to work *fast*.

‘Hey, Phil!’ Jack called out, as Phil came thundering up the stairs towards him. ‘I feel like it’s been a really long time since we’ve caught up, you know?’

Phil yelled something unintelligible at him.

‘Don’t be like that,’ Jack said, tumbling through the air and creating giant flurries of snow behind him. ‘I come with gifts! Belated Christmas gifts! How about a *snow day*?’

Phil *roared*.

Jack laughed and sailed up through the Workshop again, creating snow and ice as quickly as possible, making sure it fell thick, fat and heavy throughout. It would melt, it was only water, and it certainly turned the giant mess of colour and noise into a quieter, whiter space that Jack enjoyed.

There was a commotion on the lower levels as the rest of the yeti realised what was happening, and just as Jack unleashed the heaviest quantity of snow yet, he saw North burst out onto one of the landings and look up. He stared at Jack in shock, and Jack waved down enthusiastically.

Toothiana and Baby Tooth emerged from one of the rooms, eyes wide. Sandy came down through one of the upper windows to watch happily. Bunnymund hopped beside North and placed a commiserating hand on his shoulder.

*That’s right, Bunny, you do that. You know what it’s like.*

Jack laughed, he couldn’t help himself.

Several bursts of golden light hit the snow flurries, turning the snow into glowing beacons that stayed alight even as they landed upon toys and yeti heads and banisters and landings.

He didn’t stop until the Workshop was thoroughly coated in snow, until the yeti had all stopped working and were standing on various floors looking up at the snow flurries and the indoor clouds and Jack, no doubt wondering when it would all stop. He didn’t even stop when North started to laugh, clutching his belly and bending over, even as Bunnymund still awkwardly patted him on the back.

Jack saw Pitch step up alongside North and Bunnymund, and decided that his impromptu snow day

was at an end. He sailed back down again, landed lightly in front of them, turned and executed an impish bow.

‘At least I waited until after Christmas!’ Jack said, as North straightened.

North reached over and clapped Jack on the back so hard that Jack staggered forwards. He recognised a tiny amount of revenge in that gesture, but poked North affectionately with his staff all the same, making frost spirals curl on his clothing.

‘Ah, Jack, that is quite an entrance you are making!’ North said, as he picked up a handful of the glowing snow and rubbed it between his fingers, releasing the golden light.

Pitch stepped up so he could stand alongside Jack and then placed a hand on his shoulder. Jack leaned into it. It was a welcome warmth.

Bunnymund looked between the two of them, and then simply rolled his eyes. He was finding it easier to accept that Pitch was not the Nightmare King these days, but he still seemed to have his own private thoughts on Jack and Pitch living together.

Toothiana flew over and Sandy came on the back of a golden dolphin that dissolved back into dreamsand once he landed. He flashed up many different symbols at Jack, and Jack looked at Pitch for help interpreting. Pitch had an amused look on his face, and then he raised his eyebrows.

‘Sandy enjoyed himself,’ Pitch translated. Jack was sure Pitch had omitted a great deal of the message, but as Sandy nodded in agreement with the translation, and North didn’t correct him, Jack left it.

‘It’s *cold enough* out here!’ Toothiana said, wrapping her arms around herself, but her chastising tone was softened by the warmth in her eyes, the smile that followed.

‘It’ll melt,’ Jack said. ‘It’s just snow.’

Sandy nodded, and then said something in symbols to North, and North replied with a grunt of agreement and a small laugh.

Pitch’s hand on Jack’s shoulder scratched at him lightly through his sweatshirt. And Jack was grateful for it. Now that he wasn’t trying to annoy the Guardians on purpose, he was sensitive to whether his prank had gone too far.

‘You should relax more,’ Jack said to North, but then he looked at the other Guardians too. ‘You all should. If I have to come and make snow days in each of your homes *every year*, I’ll do it.’

‘He will,’ Pitch said flatly. ‘Trust me.’

‘I’d like to see you try, mate,’ Bunnymund said, but there was a jovial gleam to his eyes that indicated he was partly joking.

‘I’m serious,’ Jack said. ‘You all work too hard. You always lose touch with the children really quickly. And you know, I know what that’s like now. And it *sucks*. Just because something’s a habit, doesn’t mean it should be a habit. It’s not like any of you have the centre of ‘working too hard.’ North should go out and experience wonder in the world around him sometimes. And Tooth, you should go and make memories that aren’t just about collecting teeth! Sandy should...actually Sandy you’re pretty good, you’re doing a good job I think of balancing working too hard with making your own dreams come true.’



Sandy bowed in response to that, and beamed at him.

‘And Bunnymund, you’re all about hope, and you know as well as I do how easy it is to lose touch with a centre that’s fragile. You should definitely be out there looking for more of it, so that you don’t spend too long cloistered inside that Warren of yours. You guys are all ridiculous. You all agree that North should take some more time off after Christmas, but you never think it’s true for yourselves! I’m like, the only one who seems to know how to pace myself. I don’t think you need me to take more time off.’

Bunnymund snorted, and North grinned.

‘Speaking of centres,’ North said, and Pitch groaned.

‘Oh *no*,’ Pitch said, and Jack rolled his eyes.

Pitch had been a brat about the subject of centres, especially his own, ever since he’d discovered what it was. There were times when Pitch seemed wiser than the ages, when an ancient knowledge shone out of his eyes and every word he said was placed with precision. And then there were the times when Pitch was basically a petulant child.

‘Have you guessed Jack’s centre yet?’ North said, and Pitch stepped back from Jack so he could look at him. Jack had been holding back with the reveal. He was a little nervous about it. It was a fairly fundamental change, and it was the centre he wanted to keep for the rest of his life if he could; if Pitch didn’t approve, that might cause some problems.

‘I have not,’ Pitch said. There was a curiosity in his eyes.

Jack realised, with the rest of the Guardians around him, he should say something. Especially because North would probably just reveal it anyway and Jack wanted to say what it was for himself.

‘Did you choose it yourself?’ Bunnymund interjected, and Jack grinned.

‘Yeah, actually! That was good advice you gave me. So thanks for that.’

‘Any time,’ Bunnymund said, and his ears twitched in appreciation.

‘Go on,’ North said, looking warmly at Jack. ‘Tell him what it is being.’

Jack turned and looked up at Pitch, and then shrugged with one shoulder.

‘Uh, it’s freedom. My new centre is freedom. Because I wanted to feel like I had more choice. Fun kind of weighed me down a bit, and resolve weighed me down a *lot*. I just wanted to be able to choose for the fun to be balanced, for the resolve to be something I don’t have to have stuck there all the time. I can know that when I have to be resolved, I will be, and then I’m free to let it go when I need to. Or I’m free to leave and come back, and you guys will all still be here. Mora helped me choose. She was the one who made her life really different and chose all of us, and ever since then she’s pretty much done her own thing.’

Pitch pursed his lips, and then smiled at Jack; the soft, sweet smile that he often only offered to him in private.

‘I like it,’ Pitch said.

‘It means I’m free to live with you,’ Jack said, grinning. ‘Remember? You should’ve guessed then,

when I asked to live with you.'

'I was rather distracted by the fact that you asked if you could live with me,' Pitch said, and Toothiana laughed.

'The next time you stay here, Jack, I will remember this,' North said, waving his hand around at the snowy chaos. Several yeti were grumbling in the background. One had already gotten a broom.

Jack scowled, made a snowball, blew on it and threw it as hard as it could. It hit the yeti who had fetched the broom square between his shoulders. The yeti dropped the cleaning implement, turned and opened his mouth to start yelling, and then suddenly did the yeti equivalent of a chuckle, which sounded like a strange purr.

'Those yeti are too super serious for their own good,' Jack grumped.

Conversation continued between them all, until North finally declared that it was time for breakfast. Everyone started to follow, Pitch included, but Jack hung back. When Pitch noticed, he walked back towards Jack, waving off the rest of the Guardians when they looked back inquisitively.

Jack toed his foot on the snow-covered landing, and then walked over to a banister, dusting off glittering snow and sending frost spirals along it instead. Pitch joined him, leaning precariously over the edge of the railing and looking down, before straightening and turning his back to the chaos, looking towards the corridors and doorways that led to North's rooms instead.

'They're less afraid now,' Pitch said quietly. 'All of them. North in particular. In the middle of the war he was very frightened. Of losing you, of losing more yeti, of losing his Workshop, of losing his way. You helped him, you know.'

'Me?' Jack said, turning around and leaning his back on the railing, mimicking Pitch. 'I didn't do anything except freak out a lot.'

Pitch laughed, dismayed, under his breath.

'We both know that's not true. But even your panic gave North something to focus on. He likes to nurture. Having us both here helped him. With the living shadows gone, I think he may actually start to settle down. As much as he can, anyway, with a mind like his.'

Jack turned towards Pitch, and then held his hand out and collected several drifting pieces of snow in his palm. He rubbed at it until small rays of golden light spilled forth.

'I guess cold and light go together even better,' Jack said, and Pitch hummed in quiet appreciation.

'Would you believe it, the Workshop is almost tolerable right now.'

Jack stepped away from the railing, wondering if he could convince North to make one of those iced chocolates he'd made for Jack some time ago. They were delicious. Pitch fell into step behind him, brushing snow off his robe with delicate fingers.

'I wonder how us living together is going to go in the future?' Jack said.

Pitch smirked at him.

'Oh, it will likely be terrible, I assure you.'

Jack responded to Pitch's smirk with a grin, only to see Pitch's face transform as he smiled widely. Jack's heart beat faster. He reached out and took Pitch's hand in his own, squeezing it, sending frost spirals against his skin. A familiar warmth moved through his arm, it triggered a chill in his bones that felt like the best parts of winter, the most exciting winds.

They shared their smiles a moment longer, before Jack turned around, tugging Pitch with him in the direction of the kitchens.

'Terrible, huh?' Jack said.

'*Abominable*,' Pitch drawled, chuckling when Jack put on a burst of speed and tugged so hard that Pitch stumbled. Jack whirled and steadied him, knowing the light in his eyes mirrored what he saw in Pitch's. 'Just imagine, both of us trying to *enjoy* ourselves, making the *most* of each other. I can't think of anything worse.'

'I can't wait,' Jack laughed.

\*

THE END

## Chapter End Notes

For those who like dark, original fae stories, the tale of Gwyn and Augus continues in the story [Game Theory](#).

Acknowledgements:

A series like this cannot be written in 9 months without a wonderful audience like you folks. Whether you lurked, added kudos, tried to add kudos again, left regular comments, started leaving regular comments and then stopped, left one comment, left no comments, messaged me on Tumblr, you have ALL helped so much in keeping me motivated.

I'd like to thank the early readers, especially those who stuck through all the way to the end. That's a long journey! I'm excited for all the new readers that will come and stumble across this in the future. Please know that your comments – whether now, or a year or two from now are always welcome. Us authors, we're a needy bunch. (Or is that just me? Oops).

To the people at the very beginning who encouraged me to get a Tumblr for fanfiction, cheers! That got in me in touch with some of the very best aspects of fandom.

To all the fanartists, other authors, musicians, translators and cosplayers who have contributed your creativity to this story - you folks are awesome. I can't list all of you by name, but every single one of you – you probably don't know this, but I regularly go back through my tags and look at everything you've created. I've looked on the hard days so that they were less hard.

It's probably very silly of me to write these acknowledgements, but I find myself

feeling quite sentimental. And with such over-sentimentality, I will wrap up one of the longest things I've ever written in my life, and wish the Shadows and Light 'verse Pitch and Jack much happiness in their future. God knows they (and you) deserve a break from this angst-causing author!

Works inspired by this [one](#) [Five Times Pitch Was Patient and the One Time He Was Like Fuck It](#) by [Eien\\_Ni](#), [Little Talks of Shadows and Light](#) by [AsterRoc](#), [Remain Standing](#) by [Eien\\_Ni](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!